Rethinking peer interaction in language classrooms: students and L1 peers as mediators and experts in higher education

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Rethinking peer interaction in language classrooms: students and L1 peers as mediators and experts in higher education

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ABSTRACT

In today’s multilingual and multicultural societies, different languages and cultural orientations converge for complex purposes. This study examines how Spanish language students and their native peers (L1 peer = L1P) experiment with dynamic and culturally embedded language uses in higher education. The data included conversation recordings between students (N = 17) and L1Ps (N = 2). A qualitative conversation analysis of the student-L1P interaction revealed multiple and shifting learner-expert positions that led to reciprocal intercultural mediation. Both students and L1Ps mediated diverse linguistic and cultural knowledge to each other by relying on a rich array of multimodal mediational means. However, the L1Ps’ role as peers on the students’ level was crucial in fostering communication in the target language beyond native and non-native speaker positions.

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Peer interaction; mediational means; intercultural mediation; multimodal repertoire; L1 speaker–learner interaction; higher education

Introduction

Over the past few decades, foreign language education has shifted away from viewing language as a set of closed and abstract structures towards emphasizing functional language use (Doehler, 2010). This shift has led to a quest for authentic and meaningful learning involving real-life purposes (Hild- den & Kantelinen, 2016).

At present, opportunities for learning languages are versatile as media, popular culture, and everyday life provide meaningful learning contexts, particularly for young people (Dufva & Aro, 2015). The ever more diverse world marked by technological advances continues to shape classrooms (Douglas Fir Group, 2016) by facilitating access to authentic input and a wide range of multimodal media fostering language learning and communication skills (Gilmore, 2019). Nevertheless, the encounters in today’s multilingually and multiculturally complex societies entail negotiation across languages and dialects and for multiple purposes (Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008). The various contexts of use are characterized by unpredictability and include considerable variety of communication (Illés & Ackan, 2017). These developments have led to an emphasis on mediational skills as an essential part of language learning (Council of Europe, 2020).

Situated in the context of higher education, this article explores how learners can experiment with the dynamic and unplanned aspects of language use by communicating with L1 peers (L1Ps). L1Ps are international students who act as peers to students learning their language and thus enhance their awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity (Kotkavuori et al., 2022). Actively...
embodying the emergent nature of language, they shape classroom interaction. Adams and Oliver (2019) emphasize the need to practice wide-ranging communication strategies to communicate effectively with native speakers in real-life contexts. In this study, these strategies are practiced together with them in classroom. Hence, this article seeks to contribute to students’ meaningful and authentic learning experiences, which in turn shape further classroom interaction.

**Literature review**

**The strengths and limitations of peer interaction**

According to research, peers can facilitate each other’s language learning (Nunan & Bailey, 2009). Indeed, peer interaction provides multiple opportunities for negotiation of meaning, particularly in face-to-face situations (Adams & Oliver, 2019). Swain (2000) argues that peers co-construct new knowledge through collaborative dialogue, which refers to “language use mediating language learning” (2000, p. 97). Building on Vygotsky’s (1978) idea of language being one of the most important tools for mediation, Swain (2006) sees that language learning occurs when peers use language by talking through the difficulties they encounter. To resolve these difficulties collaboratively, they rely on mediational means, such as repetition, L1 use and scaffolding, thus extending the traditional novice-expert positions (Swain & Watanabe, 2013). Together, peers can experiment with the target language and have fun with it, without worrying about making mistakes and without adhering to any one fixed expert role (Philp et al., 2014). As equals, they feel free to take the initiative, to comment, and to ask and answer questions (Walsh, 2013). Moreover, studies on playful language use and humour have shown that peers can use language creatively and in complex ways (e.g., Illés & Ackan, 2017; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011). Peer interaction can thus greatly contribute to learner motivation, willingness to communicate and enjoyment of learning (Adams & Oliver, 2019; Philp et al., 2014).

Regarding the limitations of peer interaction, Philp et al. (2014) refer specifically to the lack of corrective feedback. They note the frequent use of self-correction whereas correcting others seldom occurs. However, peers may not have sufficient linguistic resources for giving feedback (Fernández Dobao, 2010) or they might not even want to correct each other (Foster & Ohta, 2005). In most cases, they lack access to situations where they can speak with the target language users (Adams, 2007; Adams & Oliver, 2019). The present study seeks to provide peers with this opportunity without limiting the benefits of interacting with each other. Therefore, placing an L1 speaker (L1S) among them requires careful consideration. In the following section, research on L1 speaker–learner interaction will be discussed.

**L1 speaker–Learner Positions in interaction**

L1S–learner interaction has been examined in both formal and informal settings. Some studies from naturally occurring situations indicate that L1Ss tend to focus on meaning rather than correctness (e.g., Kurhila, 2005; Wong, 2005). Regarding classroom situations, Fernández Dobao (2010, 2012) refers to individual variation between L1Ss’ orientation to correctness. In her comparative study between learner–learner and learner–L1S interaction at advanced levels, Fernández Dobao (2010) found that both learners and L1Ss use similar strategies, including reformulations and affirmations, but L1Ss employ them more frequently. Other studies (e.g., Mackey et al., 2003; Sato & Lyster, 2007) suggest that L1Ss provide more varied forms of feedback compared to learners. Nevertheless, their presence can cause stress for learner and limit their output and negotiation of meaning (Sato & Lyster, 2007). Overall, L1Ss contribute to lexical knowledge-building, but they also shape and modify the interaction in various ways (Fernández Dobao, 2012).

Consequently, learners and L1Ss often occupy different roles when interacting with each other in classroom, mirroring the distinction between native speakers (NS) and non-native
speakers (NNS). For instance, Park (2007) states that learners can develop an identity as incompetent interactants compared to NSs. For Park, this asymmetry is a source of learning on how to act as a competent member in the target language with a NNS identity. However, as Liddicoat (2016) argues, the language learner/NNS category generated in classrooms negatively affects how one interacts and identifies oneself with NSs in other contexts. In his view, the concept of a native speaker creates a power asymmetry between the interlocutors. While nativelikeness has become an unrealistic goal in foreign language learning (van Lier, 2004), it appears to be a persistent model that can cause anxiety due to the idea of a deficient or illegitimate speaker (Liddicoat, 2016). In addition to the use of NS/NNS concepts, the interaction between L1Ss and learners has typically been examined in dyads, which might even emphasize the speakers’ different statuses. In a recent study in a Finnish university context, Kotkavuori and her research group (2022) discovered that by acting as peers at the students’ level, the L1Ss were able to blur the NS–NNS positions.

Referring to the current diversity of languages and cultures, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) regard nativelikeness as an illegitimate model. Similarly, Kramsch and Whiteside (2007) question the validity of the concept in a post-modern world “where everyone is more or less native and non-native, more or less novice and expert, more or less a capable peer” (2007, p. 917). Hence, operating functionally with a target language in changing situations and as a lingua franca user has gained more ground (Dufva & Pietikäinen, 2009). The present study examines how different speakers co-construct meaning and learn from each other linguistically and culturally. Therefore, in this article the term “native speaker” is replaced by L1 peer, and the term “learner” by student. As all interlocutors bring their cultural and linguistic framework, their backgrounds and experiences with their meanings and values to the interaction (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), they all serve as peers and models with regard to each other in understanding the world.

Peer interaction as a site for mediating diverse realities

In the setting for this study, students and L1Ps engage with languages and cultures in their joint effort to share and create meaning. Wells (2000) draws attention to the characteristics of an utterance as “saying” and “what is said” (2000, p. 73), which occur simultaneously in joint knowledge-building. In “saying”, the speaker attempts to create meaning for others, which involves interpreting previous contributions by “extending, questioning or qualifying” (Wells, 2000, p. 74) them meaningfully. But the utterance also becomes a materialized product to which others and the speaker can respond, which increases mutual understanding. Applying Bakhtin’s (1981) conceptualization of language, Hall et al. (2005, p. 3) note that through utterances “speakers bring their cultural worlds into existence, maintain them and shape them for their purposes.” For these authors, the act of speaking involves reflecting on one’s understanding of its contexts of use as well as creating a space to express oneself with one’s own voice. Consequently, language, culture, and self are all intertwined in the meaning-making, where borders of self and other are explored and negotiated (Marchenkova, 2005). Expanding on Bakhtin’s (1981) functional language use, Dufva (2020) suggests that speakers rely on a multimodal repertoire involving embodied expressions and material resources provided by the given situation.

In today’s multicultural and multilingual contexts, the negotiation of meaning requires “moving between” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 43) languages, cultures, and knowledge systems (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). When interlocutors make sense of diverse cultural realities through interpreting language in use, they are engaged in intercultural mediation (Liddicoat, 2014). In Liddicoat’s (2014) words, learning a foreign language means developing interpretations of language as a culturally contextualized and culturally shaped phenomenon by mediating it for oneself and for others. For Liddicoat, besides interpreting this phenomenon for oneself, it is necessary to facilitate understanding for those with a different linguistic and cultural framework. In this process, the interlocutors develop multiple understandings by making connections, analysing,
comparing, and reflecting on diverse perspectives both as outsiders and insiders (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

The Companion Volume to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020) views mediation broadly and includes social aspects. According to the Companion Volume, the speaker acts as a mediator by building bridges between interlocutors, who may show differences individually, socioculturally, sociolinguistically, or intellectually. Thus, a mediator aims to positively influence the dynamics between the interlocutors by displaying curiosity and sensitivity to different standpoints (Council of Europe, 2020). Overall, creating a “safe space” where all interlocutors can express themselves freely is an essential part of mediation that fosters communication (Council of Europe, 2020).

In light of the above, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do students and L1 peers mediate meaning in their conversational interactions?

RQ2. How do students and L1 peers manifest intercultural mediation in their conversational interactions?

RQ3. What roles do L1 peers play in mediating communication?

Method

The data consist of approximately six hours of conversation recordings from a Finnish University Language Centre course organized in spring 2022. The intermediate Spanish conversation course, entitled “Practical Spanish course with a focus on culture” (CEFR A2 level) had 19 enrolled participants, out of which 17 were students and two L1Ps. As conversations are central forms of language use and essential in creating, expressing, and sharing meaning (van Lier, 2004), this course suited the purposes of the study. One of the L1Ps was from Spain and the other from Chile, and they were distinguished from each other by their Spanish varieties. Both L1Ps had come to Finland as exchange students from France, which is reflected in the conversations. Furthermore, two other exchange students from France participated in the course as students. None of them knew each other previously. A few students had sojourned in a Spanish-speaking country previously. The teacher was originally from Spain and had been living in Finland for almost 20 years.

The course included two 1.5-hour classes per week. It covered a wide range of topics from family life, festivities, and food to tourism, politics, and environmental issues throughout the Spanish-speaking world. The teacher provided the students with questions for the conversations, but they were also free to elaborate on each topic. The pedagogical purpose was to enable students and L1Ps to express personal meaning and establish mutual understanding (Seedhouse, 2004). The L1Ps regularly participated in the classes, usually joining a group of students for one conversation activity and changing groups during the lesson.

Data collection

To collect data, the researcher contacted the course teacher, who invited her to visit one lesson at the end of March. Following the responsible research ethics policy of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK), she discussed the purpose of the study and issues of confidentiality with the participants. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants to use their anonymised conversations for the study. They received the EU GDPR Privacy Notice on the course’s Moodle platform. The recordings were made during four lessons between 5 and 28 April. A digital voice recorder was placed on the table around which the students and the L1P were sitting. The researcher sat close to the table and took observation notes on the conversations, including bodily expressions. To gain a participant’s perspective (Seedhouse, 2004), the researcher agreed to participate in the lessons as a Spanish learner between the conversations which involved other activities.
Analysis

After the sessions, the data were transcribed, and the interlocutors’ names were pseudonymized. For the sake of reliability, a researcher colleague and Spanish teacher listened to the recordings. She was familiar with the practice of using L1Ps on her courses. The researcher met with her to assess and discuss the findings in light of mediation. Conversation analysis was used to identify interactional patterns and practices (Seedhouse, 2004). The aim here was to gain a richer understanding of how students and L1Ps co-construct meaning through talk-in-interaction (Sert, 2017). The single-case analysis of each conversation thus particularly focused on the aspects of linguistic and intercultural mediation.

The analysis revealed the multi-layered structure of the interactions (Walsh, 2013), leading to two categories. The first category (see Table 1) displays the conversation initiator, the multimodal (linguistic, material, and embodied) mediational means used by students and L1Ps, as well as their use of corrective feedback. The second category (see Table 2) shows the strategies of intercultural mediation that students and L1Ps use to achieve mutual understanding. Five examples were chosen to illustrate the findings presented in the tables.

Findings

The findings will address the research questions as follows. First, three examples shall illustrate the linguistic mediational means used by students and L1Ps in their negotiation of meaning. After, these examples will be examined from the perspective of the L1P’s roles. Next, two other examples will illustrate the strategies that students and L1Ps use to mediate interculturally, including the use of embodied and material means. Finally, these examples shall be examined with a focus on the L1P’s roles.

Table 1 shows that both students and L1Ps mostly rely on similar mediational means to negotiate meaning. The initiator of the conversation is either a student or the L1P. Corrective feedback is sparingly given (Foster & Ohta, 2005; Kurhila, 2005); instead, interlocutors co-construct new knowledge, particularly vocabulary (Fernández Dobao, 2012). Embodied behaviour (Sert, 2017) appears in nearly every conversation, and paralinguistic elements, particularly laughter (Walsh, 2013), are present in all of them.

EXAMPLE 1

Example 1 shows that repetition, affirmation, and paraphrasing are used by both students and the L1P (Fernández Dobao, 2010) in co-constructing vocabulary.

1 Lena: No es un-un-una iglesia de liberación es una iglesia un poco(.)cómo se dice (.).hay diez(.)abiscos?
   “It’s not like a church of liberation it’s a church like, how do you say, there are ten bishops?”
2 Julieta: Obispos?
   “Bishops?”
3 Lena: Obispos?
   “Bishops”
4 Julieta: Obispos si=
   “Bishops yes”
5 Lena: =Obispos y solamente dos son mujeres.
   “Bishops and only two are women”
6 Julieta: [Aah]
7 Lena: Y los otros son hombres
   “And the others are men”
8 Julieta: Sí o sea es una profesión masculina (.). masculina?
   “Yes in other words it’s a masculine profession?”
9 Lena: Sí

In line 1, Lena explains her opinion about the Lutheran church in Finland. She suggests an incorrect word for “bishop” in Spanish, and Julieta (line 2), the Chilean L1P, suggests her the correct
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td>Laughs</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
word (obispos). Both use repetition to confirm the new word, and Julieta (line 4) makes an affirmation (sí), after which (lines 5 and 7) Lena can finish her contribution. In line 6, Julieta signals her understanding and then (line 8) paraphrases Lena’s utterance (it’s a masculine profession?). Lena (line 9) affirms it in the end.

EXAMPLE 2

Clarification requests are common in conversational interaction (Seedhouse, 2004), as Table 1 shows. However, L1Ps often need to reformulate their questions to facilitate understanding. This is illustrated in Example 2, in which the Spanish L1P David is discussing Cuba with Anni and Kati.

1 David: Qué opináis de Cuba?
   “What do you think of Cuba?”
2 Anni: (.) Opináis?
   “Think of?”
3 David: No digo que opinais de Cuba cuál es vuestra opinión sobre el país?
   “No, I’m saying what’s your opinion of the country?”
4 Anni: A: creo que no tengo tan…much…mucha información que puedo tener una opinión (laughs)
   “I don’t think I have that much information that I can have an opinion”
5 David: Cuando-cuando pensais en Cuba que es lo primero que os viene en la mente
   “When you think of Cuba what is the first thing that comes into your mind?”
6 Kati: Los cigarros los cigarillos qué es= (laughs)
   “The cigars what is”
7 David: =A:: los puros m:: cierto cierto.
   “Oh, the cigars sure”

The topic of this example, Cuba, is rather challenging to both students and David, the Spanish L1P. In line 1, David initiates the conversation with a question (Qué opináis de Cuba?). Anni (line 2) does not understand it and asks for clarification. David (line 3) reformulates his question and Anni (line 4) can respond with a negative answer followed by laughter. David (line 5) must reformulate his question again to continue the conversation. It helps Kati (line 6) formulate an answer, but she needs assistance in finding the Spanish word for ‘cigars’. David (line 7) acknowledges her suggestion and provides her with the word (puros).

EXAMPLE 3

According to Table 1, students either switch to their first language (Swain & Watanabe, 2013) or English, while L1Ps primarily use Spanish. This pattern is exemplified in Example 3, where David, Anni, and Kati continue their discussion on Cuba.

1 David: Mmm cuáles son las colores de la bandera cubana?
   “What are the colors of the Cuban flag?”
2 Anni: Como amarillo= (laughs)
   “Like yellow”
3 Kati: =No es el azul e:: m:: cómo es valkonen,
   “No, it’s blue, what is white?”

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4 Anni: Blanco
"White"
5 Kati: Blanco si azul blanco y rojo como (.) stripes=
"White yes blue, white, and red like stripes"
6 Anni: =Ah si-
7 David: =Li-líneas
"Stripes"
8 Kati: Sí sí

In this example, the conversation continues with David’s question (line 1) about the colours of the Cuban flag. Anni suggests “yellow” (line 2), but Kati (line 3) is aware the colours. However, as

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<td>3. Discussing poverty</td>
<td>Explaining one’s thoughts on poverty</td>
<td>Asking questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How was your weekend?</td>
<td>No (Focus on Finland)</td>
<td>Asking questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Festivities and traditions</td>
<td>Describing Chilean dance, Explaining Chilean Christmas &amp; New Year</td>
<td>Asking questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Spanish festivities I would like to experience</td>
<td>No (Focus on students)</td>
<td>Asking questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Music and dancing</td>
<td>Describing preferred music, Spanish music &amp; dances</td>
<td>Asking questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Getting to know Cuba</td>
<td>Describing Cuba’s geography</td>
<td>Asking questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Travelling to Cuba</td>
<td>No (Focus on students)</td>
<td>Asking questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Food and cooking</td>
<td>Describing Chilean dishes</td>
<td>Asking questions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
she lacks the word “white” in Spanish, she says it in Finnish (valkonen). In line 4, Anni provides her with the word “blanco”, and Kati (line 5) goes on to describe the design of the flag. To fill in the gap, she uses the English word “stripe”, which David (line 7) provides her in Spanish (líneas).

In these three examples, L1Ps play a crucial role in co-constructing new vocabulary with the students. They also foster communication by paraphrasing, reformulating questions, and affirming the students’ contributions. Additionally, the L1Ps are also learners, particularly concerning the topics.

Intercultural mediation plays a significant role in the negotiation of meaning between students and L1Ps (Liddicoat, 2014). Typically, it is prompted by a question from either a student or an L1P, leading to the mediation of a different cultural reality. As shown in Table 2, students and L1Ps employ similar mediational strategies to make sense of diverse cultures. Describing and explaining one’s own cultural realities or experiences of another culture are common strategies when mediating for others, while asking questions, making comparisons, as well as relating and interpreting are recurrent processes for developing an understanding of new cultural realities (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). When students and L1Ps have little knowledge of the topic, they pool their knowledge and use available material resources (mobile phone) (Dufva, 2020), spending more time reflecting on it.

**EXAMPLE 4**

Example 4 demonstrates how the Chilean L1P Julieta mediates the Chilean national dance to Anni and Vera, and how Vera develops an understanding of the dance by relating it to what she knows and by making comparisons. The example is presented in two parts.

1. Vera: Cua-cómo se dice en-Chile de baile nacional?
   “What do you call the national dance in Chile?”
2. Julieta: Se llama la Cueca.
   “It’s called la Cueca”
3. Vera: Ah guè?
   “Oh, what?”
4. Julieta: Cueca si= “Cueca yes”
5. Vera: =Cueca y cómo-cómo lo bailas? (laughs with Anni)
   “Cueca, and how do you dance it?”
6. Julieta: Si presento o sea les puedo mostrar quizás les puedo poner un video si presento algo pero es como:: imitación de la gallina con el gallo
   “If I present, or I could maybe show you a video if I present something, but it’s like an imitation of a hen with a rooster”
7. Vera: M:: Sí sí. (Vera and Anni nod)
8. Julieta: Conoces?
   “Do you know it?”
9. Vera: No conozco pero es muy tradicional para para yo creo que bailes tradicionales creo que en Rusia es un poco como=
   “No, but for me it’s very traditional; I think that in Russia the traditional dances are a bit like”

In line 1, Vera’s question is slightly incorrect (de baile nacional), but Julieta ignores the error and provides the dance in line 2 (la Cueca). After Vera’s clarification request (line 3), Julieta repeats the name in line 4. Vera (line 5) repeats it again and asks Julieta how one dances the Cueca. She laughs with Anni, seemingly amused at the idea of Julieta showing them the dance during the lesson. In line 6, Julieta suggests that she could present a video about it. She completes her utterance by explaining that the Cueca mimics a hen and a rooster. After Vera and Anni (line 7) have shown their understanding, Julieta (line 8) checks whether Vera knows the dance. Vera’s answer is negative (line 9), but she makes an interpretation (it’s seems traditional) and compares Cueca to traditional dances in Russia, her second home country.

Next, Julieta continues to mediate the idea of the dance by bodily movements (Sert, 2017).

10. Julieta: =Si es como que el gallo está como él que guía a la gallina qué entonces es la mujer a el hombre y como quedan vuelta y como zapateos con los pies (taps on the floor three times with her foot) y como con un vestido grande la mujer y el hombre con un sombrero así (points to her head) y con un poncho=

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“It’s like the rooster guides the hen and then the hen, the rooster, like, they turn around and tap the floor with their feet, the woman with a big dress and the man with a hat like this and with a poncho”

11 Vera: =M:: sí sí
12 Julieta: Sí eso (laughs)
13 Vera: Mm me parece que es muy tradicional porque el sombrero y el poncho.

“It seems very traditional to me because of the hat and the poncho”

As line 10 shows, Julieta uses bodily gestures to illustrate what the dancers do and how they are dressed: she taps the floor with her foot and points to her head to show that the man wears a hat. Vera signals her understanding (line 11), and Julieta (line 12) affirms with (sí, eso). In line 13, Vera continues to interpret the dance by saying that the sombrero and the poncho seem very traditional to her.

EXAMPLE 5

Below, intercultural mediation occurs the opposite way. Example 5 is presented in three parts and shows how the participants’ contributions dynamically shape and transform the interaction context, making it complex (Seedhouse, 2004). Marko’s favourite festivity, Midsummer, creates a problem of understanding for Julieta. Marko and Vera collaborate to mediate the meaning of the Finnish midsummer festivity to Julieta.

1 Julieta: Qué es la fiesta de San Juan? “What is Midsummer?”
2 Marko: Qué es la fiesta- “What’s the festivity”
3 Julieta: Sí (. ) o sea no sé qué es “I mean I don’t know what it is”
4 Marko: Juhannus juhannus en finlandés (laughs) “Juhannus in Finnish”
5 Vera: En finés (laughs)
6 Julieta: Juhunnus? 7 Marko: Juhannus sí
8 Julieta: Pero qué se hace “But what do they do?”
9 Marko: M:: (. ) Qué se hace (. ) m: depende de la person (laughs) “What do they do; it depends on the person”

The conversation begins with Julieta’s question to Marko (Qué es la fiesta de San Juan?). As Marko repeats the question (line 2), she reformulates it in line 3. Marko (line 4) suggests the Finnish word for Midsummer, “Juhannus”, and starts laughing. Vera (line 5) laughs at Marko’s answer and corrects his incorrect use of the adjective “finlandés” (nationality) with “finés” (language). Marko’s funny answer shapes the interaction situation and its roles (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011) by making Julieta act as a language learner and repeat the word “Juhannus” (line 6). Marko (line 7) repeats it again and confirms that she pronounced it correctly. Next, Julieta (line 8) continues to unravel the festivity with another question (But what do they do?). After repeating Julieta’s question, Marko (line 9) takes a moment to ponder before offering an answer (It depends on the person), followed by a laughter. He appears to want to continue the interaction humorously in his own terms (Illés & Ackan, 2017).

Below, Vera contributes to the co-construction of meaning, attempting to orient it toward the goal (Walsh, 2013) of helping Julieta understand what Midsummer consists of.

10 Vera: Pero yo creo que hay un fiesta de: -de-de San Juan en España tambien= “But I think there’s a Midsummer festivity in Spain too”
11 Marko: =Sí en España es-sí sí=
   "Yes in Spain, is yes"
12 Vera: [también] y tú no=
   "And you don’t"
13 Julieta: =Sí yo no sé de España (laughs)
   "Yes, I don’t know about Spain"
14 Marko: [No sé cómo se dice] ilotulitus (. ) cuando viví en España hay (. ) día ilotulitus en San Juan (. ) no en Finlandia no-
   "I don’t know how you say fireworks; when I lived in Spain there’s a day of fireworks at Midsummer, but not in Finland"
15 Julieta: -Ah no en-no en Finlandia es la fiesta?
   "Oh, so in Finland there’s no celebration?"
16 Marko: Es ilotulitus pa-
   "It’s fireworks"
17 Vera: ilotulitus es fuegos artificiales= (Shows the Spanish word on her phone)
   "Fireworks is fuegos artificiales"
18 Marko: =Sí fuegos artificiales si sí San Juan
   "Yes, fireworks, yes Midsummer"
19 Julieta: Aah sí para mí es más como el año nuevo=
   "Oh, for me it’s more like New Year"
20 Vera: =Sí para mí tambien=
   "Yes, for me too" 21 Marko: =Sí sí

Vera (line 10) starts this part by mentioning Spanish Midsummer. Marko (line 11) confirms the existence of a Midsummer festival in Spain. In line 12, Vera remembers that Julieta does not know much about Spain, a fact Julieta confirms (line 13). But Vera’s contribution sparks Marko’s memory about the time he lived in Spain, which he brings into the conversation. As he (line 14) does not know the Spanish word for “fireworks”, he uses English and Finnish to explain that there is a day with fireworks (day ilotulitus) in Spain. In line 15, Julieta interprets Marko’s statement by checking whether he meant that there are no celebrations in Finland. Marko (line 16) ignores Julieta’s question and repeats the Finnish word “ilotulitus”. In the meantime, Vera (line 17) finds the Spanish word for “fireworks” on her mobile phone (es fuegos artificiales). Marko (line 18) confirms and repeats the word in Spanish. This leads Julieta (line 19) to relate the festivity to what she knows, namely New Year. As lines 20 and 21 show, Vera and Marko both agree with Julieta’s comparison: for all three, fireworks are associated with New Year.

The rest of the conversation illustrates that “fireworks” is key to understanding the difference between Spanish and Finnish Midsummer.

22 Vera: Pero no es bonfires (. ) halusit sä sanoa ilotulitus vai?
   "But isn’t it bonfires; did you want to say fireworks or?"
23 Marko: ilotulitus si si joo
   "Fireworks yes"
24 Vera: [A:h pero San Juan es–]
   "But Midsummer is"
25 Marko: [Joo pero creo] que no es posible en Finlandia en ju-junio porque es tan claro no es oscuro (. ) no vemos la la luz (. ) es no es oscuro en junio
   "But I think it’s not possible in Finland in June because it’s so light, we can’t see the light, it’s not dark in June"
26 Julieta: Ah si es verdad
   "Oh yes, that’s true"
27 Vera: (. ) Porque en verano es: h tenemos mucha luz muy tarde tambien
   "Because in summer we have lots of light very late"
28 Julieta: Si hay como poco tiempo de oscuridad
   "Yes, there’s like a short time of darkness"

In line 22, Vera checks whether Marko meant “bonfires” instead, (Pero no es bonfires?) and clarifies her question in Finnish. This refers to the common burning of bonfires in Finland on Midsummer’s Eve. Marko (line 23) affirms both in Spanish and in Finnish that he meant fireworks. Subsequently, Vera (line 24) attempts to redirect the conversation to the Finnish Midsummer, but Marko (line 25) interrupts her, insisting on the idea of a Midsummer festivity in Spain,
which is celebrated differently. He clarifies that fireworks are impractical in Finland during the summer (it’s not dark in June). Julieta (line 26) understands Marko’s point. The conversation reaches the main idea of the Finnish Midsummer, the celebration of the summer solstice. Vera (line 27) paraphrases Marko’s statement, and Julieta (line 32) confirms her understanding by rephrasing Vera’s contribution. They appear to have reached a common understanding.

The L1P’s role expands in the examples above. In example 4, she strives to mediate a cultural event for others, whereas example 5 emphasizes her role as a learner, both culturally and linguistically. By comparing and interpreting she develops an understanding of an unknown festivity, but she also furthers communication by asking questions and reformulating them.

Discussion

The results of this study illuminate various aspects of meaning-making in student-L1 peer interactions. First, this section discusses the multimodal mediational means, and then moves on to intercultural mediation. Finally, it delves into the L1P’s roles in shaping the relationships and interactions.

Introducing an L1P among the students aimed to expand the possibilities of peer interaction. These findings suggest that the conversations harness the strengths of both peer and L1–learner interaction. In other words, students and L1Ps participate in collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2000, 2006) with mostly similar mediational means. Both rely on repetition, and scaffolding (Swain & Watanabe, 2013), but the L1Ps particularly contribute to building the students’ lexical knowledge (Adams, 2007; Fernández Dobao, 2012). Similarly, both students and L1Ps regularly paraphrase their contributions and request clarifications from each other (Fernández Dobao, 2010; Sato & Lyster, 2007). However, L1Ps often need to reformulate their questions to facilitate communication. Moreover, besides L1 use (Swain & Watanabe, 2013), students also rely on English, which engages L1Ps in the collaborative dialogue; L1Ps provide them with target-like reformulations (Philp et al., 2014) and maintain use of the language. Thus, the interlocutors rely on their multilingual repertoire (Council of Europe, 2020) and complement this repertoire with embodied expressions, such as gestures and bodily movements, as well as material resources (Dufva, 2020). Importantly, both L1P concentrate on the meaning instead of the accuracy of the contributions (Fernández Dobao, 2010; Kurhila, 2005; Wong, 2005). In fact, while the students typically correct themselves (Philp et al., 2014), L1Ps provide them corrective feedback only in a few conversations as correcting might disturb the balance of the activity and limit student participation (Sato & Lyster, 2007).

Students and L1Ps explore and negotiate languages, cultures, and each other through interaction (Marchenkova, 2005). Their negotiation of meaning thus embraces language as a culturally shaped phenomenon through intercultural mediation (Liddicoat, 2014). In this sense, the student-L1P interaction proved fruitful in developing mediational skills to make each other’s cultural and linguistic frameworks known (Council of Europe, 2020; Liddicoat, 2014). In particular, the Chilean L1P offered the students an entrance to another Spanish-speaking reality they knew little about. Julieta acted as an intercultural mediator (Kotkavuori et al., 2022; Liddicoat, 2014) by increasing the students’ awareness of different cultural reality and their understanding of how to participate in the target language community of practice (Magnan, 2008). Conversely, the students provided both L1Ps with an avenue for their cultures and culturally shaped language uses and meanings.

Accordingly, the expert-learner positions change (Philp et al., 2014), but an interlocutor can embrace both simultaneously. Indeed, the students were not only language learners; they displayed expertise in their own as well as other cultures (such as Spain), which may have balanced power relations and dismantled the L1S–learner positions. In this kind of framework, the interlocutors exceed their NS/NNS identities (Kurhila, 2005) and act between complex relations by mediating diverse realities for themselves and for others (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). As the L1Ps and students created the space for each other to participate with their own voices (Hall et al., 2005), they also
turned to humour and laughter, in particular. Laughter, as an extra-linguistic factor, seemed to indicate approval and affirmation (Walsh, 2013). Regarding the humorous use of language, as in the case of “Juhannus” in example 5, it added to the complexity of the interaction and to the L1P’s Finnish language learning (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011).

By seeking to produce meaningful utterances, the interlocutors came to understand themselves and each other better (Wells, 2000). While every interlocutor is a mediator in this sense, L1Ps stand in a particularly complex and shifting position, requiring the ability to read the interlocutors’ needs and abilities (Kotkavuori et al., 2022). Hence, L1Ps can foster communication without acting as a more legitimate speaker, by assessing or limiting contributions from a NSs’ perspective (Liddicoat, 2016). As peers at the student’s level and showing willingness to learn from them, they can encourage communication and create a “safe space” for every interlocutor (Council of Europe, 2020; Kotkavuori et al., 2022). When symmetry is maintained, the students feel encouraged to ask questions, interrupt, comment or just listen depending on their communicative needs (Walsh, 2013). Most of the time, L1Ps alternate between giving space and intervening, between ensuring the conversation flows and taking initiative as a facilitator (Council of Europe, 2020). However, they have a unique voice which shapes the interaction: their spontaneous questions can stimulate the interpretive process of viewing the world from alternative perspectives (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to investigate how students can dynamically experiment with the unplanned and culturally embedded aspects of language by interacting with L1 peers in higher education. The first research question addressed how students and L1Ps mediate meaning, the second focused on intercultural mediation and the third examined the L1P’s roles in mediating communication.

Due to the small sample size, this study is exploratory in nature, aiming to illustrate key aspects of the student-L1P interaction. Additional data are needed to understand how students benefit from the L1P’s colloquial language, regional varieties, and discussions of meaning and contexts. Furthermore, future research should examine the L1Ps’ roles and individual differences in different learning activities.

Despite these limitations, the findings illustrate that conversational interaction can be a mutually enriching learning experience for both students and L1Ps regarding mediation. To engage with diversity, active engagement is needed (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). In the student-L1P dynamic interaction, the engagement goes beyond “the possession of knowledge about another culture” (Liddicoat, 2014, p. 275) and involves using a rich multilingual and multimodal repertoire (Dufva, 2020). However, an efficient interplay between linguistic, cultural, affective, and social aspects requires the L1P to act as a peer at the students’ level. This way, all participants can be language learners and cultural experts simultaneously. Moreover, mediational means can be broadly used to provide one another with access to the respective cultures and language uses in a safe atmosphere. Finally, these results shed light on the L1P’s crucial role as a mediator attuned to learners’ needs, standpoints, and the evolving interaction situation.

Classrooms live and function in this world by encouraging communication between people and cultures (Marchenkova, 2005). This article has shown how university language classrooms can embrace dynamic and evolving languages and cultures “in person”. Extending the possibilities of mediation in peer interaction beyond L1S–learner roles enhances an authentic and meaningful learning experience. Finally, L1P-student collaboration can provide a platform for intercultural dialogue as a key to managing in complex real-life situations.

Notes: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

(·) a short pause of any length

:: lengthening of the preceding sound
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