

Topic maintenance in video-mediated virtual exchanges: Rolling the ball back in L2 interactions

Betül Çimenli^a, Olcay Sert^{b,*}, Christopher Jenks^c

^a *Bartın University, Education Faculty, Department of English Language Teaching, Turkey*

^b *Mälardalen University, School of Education, Culture and Communication, Box 883, 721 23, Västerås, Sweden*

^c *Aalborg University, Department of Culture and Learning & The Faculty of Humanities, Denmark*

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how topics are managed in virtual exchanges between tertiary-level English language learners from Turkey and Kazakhstan. The study reports on a previously unexplored interactional device referred to as “rolling the ball back” (RBB) that invites a co-participant to maintain a current topic of discussion through reciprocation of a question asked previously. Using multimodal conversation analysis, the findings show that RBBs accomplish a range of discursive actions through this reciprocation including requesting for information, asking for opinions, changing speakership, and creating a space for topic extension. RBBs are pedagogically significant and interactionally salient in that “rolling it back” allows students to maintain topic progressivity by asking reciprocating questions in online interaction. These findings contribute to the literature on topic maintenance, as well as existing work concerned with how the discursive organization in virtual exchange can be used to enhance teaching and learning. RBBs can be used by language researchers and practitioners to design new learning practices and materials that facilitate robust learner talk in and out of language classrooms.

1. Introduction

Virtual exchange (VE)¹ has received much attention in the language and intercultural education literature (O’Dowd, & Lewis, 2016), as it allows geographically dispersed language learners who have different cultural backgrounds to collaborate and interact in a target/common language (O’Dowd & O’Rourke, 2019). These online spaces also facilitate the development of language skills (Dooly, 2011), learner autonomy (Eneau & Develotte, 2012; Lewis & O’Dowd, 2016), intercultural competence (O’Dowd, & Lewis, 2016), and digital literacies (O’Dowd, 2018). Accordingly, VE increases opportunities to understand the language used in online spaces, to have varied learning experiences that come with such encounters, and to teach effectively in digital environments, to name a few. These features of VE have been investigated through several methodological approaches, yet very few of those studies focus on the discursive organization of telecollaborative practices. The present work narrows this empirical gap by examining the sequential organization of topic development in different virtual exchange meetings by employing multimodal conversation analysis (CA) as a methodology.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: bcimenli@bartin.edu.tr (B. Çimenli), olcay.sert@mdu.se (O. Sert), cjje@hum.aau.dk (C. Jenks).

¹ Virtual exchange is often used as an umbrella term (O’Dowd, 2018), including both formal (O’Dowd & Dooly, 2020) and informal usages (e. g., as a stylistic choice to denote telecollaborative nature of online interactions). In our study, we employ the latter use to refer to video-mediated dyadic online interactions.

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Although VE has been the topic of investigation for more than two decades, CA has a short history in computer-assisted language teaching and learning literature (Gonzalez Lloret, 2011, Gonzalez, 2013; Tudini, 2010, 2013). CA research on mediated interaction has evolved from looking primarily at voice-based communication approximately 10 years ago (e. g., Brandt & Jenks, 2011, 2013; Jenks & Brandt, 2013; Nguyen, 2017) to examining video-mediated interactions in recent years in line with the ‘embodied turn’ (Neville, 2015). This evolution of CA research coincides with recent advances in technology, which has allowed researchers to increase empirical opportunities by using new tools, such as screen recordings, to uncover the complex interactional, epistemic, and multimodal features of L2 online talk (Balaman, 2018, 2019; Balaman & Sert, 2017a, 2017b; Sert & Balaman, 2015, 2018). To this end, researchers have documented a variety of interactional and language-learning related phenomena in online settings, including the development of interactional competence (Balaman & Sert, 2017a, 2017b), resources to resolve troubles (Dooly & Davitova, 2018), and language choice (Sert & Balaman, 2018).

Although CA-inspired studies of virtual exchange continue to grow, there are many research gaps. One such gap relates to how topic maintenance is organised in virtual exchanges. Topic maintenance can be understood as a collaborative process of managing the substance of a conversation, such as co-developing a topic. It is an important area of investigation, as topic maintenance is an essential skill to possess when participating in ongoing conversations in-and-out of language classrooms. Indeed, topic maintenance has been shown to be central to how students develop interactional competencies (Pekarek Doehler, 2018, 2019, 2021; Galaczi, 2008, 2014; Nguyen, 2011; Salaberry & Kunitz, 2019; Seedhouse & Supakorn, 2015; Supakorn, 2017). The current study builds on these interaction-based studies by exploring how L2 users who do not share a common first language manage topic maintenance in online dyadic interactions during a one-term VE project. Our study differs from previous VE projects by focusing on the Middle East/Europe (Turkey) and Central Asia (Kazakhstan), extending mainstream VE activities to a wider socio-economical and geographical space. The data for the study come from screen recordings of conversations between Turkish and Kazakh students. Using multimodal conversation analysis, the study documents an interactional phenomenon that frequently occurs in the dataset: rolling the ball back (RBB). An RBB is an interactional device that invites a co-participant to maintain a current topic of discussion; this is done by asking a question that reciprocates something that has been asked in a prior turn. RBBs are thus helpful in maintaining topic progressivity, which is pedagogically and interactionally significant in that students are often asked to engage in extended conversation despite still learning the target language. The following research questions are formulated to reveal how RBBs unfold and what actions they perform in online dyadic interactions:

- 1) How are RBBs designed and organized sequentially in video-mediated virtual exchange?
- 2) How do RBBs function in video-mediated virtual exchange?

2. Literature review

2.1. Virtual exchange in L2 teaching and learning

Virtual exchanges are “student-centred, international, and collaborative approaches to learning where knowledge and understanding are constructed through interaction and negotiation with students from other cultures” (Baroni et al., 2019, pp. 8–9). VEs are used in different pedagogical contexts from in-class lessons to out-of-class activities. For more than 20 years, they have represented a resource for language teachers (Dooly, 2011; O’Dowd, 2015; O’Dowd & Dooly, 2020), frequently being used to promote interaction in an additional language (L2; e. g., Dooly & Davitova, 2018; Knight et al., 2020; Sert & Balaman, 2015, 2018; Tudini, 2016, 2018; Brandt, 2011; Brandt & Jenks, 2011, 2013; Jenks, 2018; Jenks & Brandt, 2013). The popularity of VEs has led to a number of important empirical developments, such as an understanding of how online interaction promotes language proficiency, learner autonomy, intercultural competence, and digital literacy skills (Dooly, 2011; Lewis & O’Dowd, 2016).

Specifically, the literature on VE includes studies that look at peer feedback and reflective practice (Belz, 2006; Vinagre & Muñoz, 2011; Ware & O’Dowd, 2008), the role of interaction and interactive feedback (Canals, 2022), the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC, Belz, 2003, 2005; Fuchs, 2019; Lee & Song, 2019; Lewis & O’Dowd, 2016; Ryshina-Pankova, 2018; Ware, 2005, 2013), task design and implementation (Dooly, 2011; O’Dowd & Waite, 2009), the acquisition of technological, pedagogical and content skills (Dooly & Sandler, 2013; Rienties et al., 2020), telecollaborative competences and attitudes (Grau & Turula, 2019; O’Dowd, 2015), language proficiency and learning practices (Cunningham, 2019; Lewis & O’Dowd, 2016), the negotiation of meaning (Tudini, 2007), pre-service teacher training (e. g., instruction giving and lexical explanations) (Guichon & Wigham, 2016; Satar & Wigham, 2017; Wigham, 2017; Wigham & Satar, 2021), and the challenges encountered during telecollaboration (Belz, 2003; Belz & Muller-Hartmann, 2003; O’Dowd, 2011; Ware, 2005).

While the aforementioned studies contribute much to current understandings of VE, a significant portion of this work is based on written or text-based interactions (Akiyama & Cunningham, 2018). For example, Oskoz and Gimeno-Sanz (2019) use appraisal theory to examine how L2 speakers from the US and Spain express their ideological positions. During three online forums, the participants shaped their ideological positions according to their first and second culture, and topic of conversation (e. g., immigration and nationalism). The researchers reveal that topics of discussion and country of origin influence how interactants organize their discourses. Video-mediated platforms are becoming, or have become, the preferred way of communicating both in and out of classrooms. The need to narrow the gap between the technology studied in extant research and the communication tools used in present times is argued by a number of scholars. O’Dowd (2016a, 2016b), for instance, argues that videoconferencing presents new communicative and pedagogical challenges for its users and thus more attention must be placed on such technologies (see also Kern, 2014; Malinowski & Kramsch, 2014).

To this end, there is a small but growing body of work that investigates video-mediated interactions within the context of virtual exchange.² For example, Leone's (2012) video-mediated teletandem project between Italian and English-speaking participants suggests that the degree of communicative reciprocity established between students, as accomplished through for example clarification requests and confirmation requests, contributes to the development of ICC. Similarly, Akiyama (2015) investigates the affordances of virtual exchanges by examining the perceptions of 24 participants of a task-based teletandem project between Japan and the USA. The results suggest that VE provides a number of opportunities for the participants, including increased L1 awareness, sociolinguistic awareness, and the development of ICC. Saito and Akiyama (2017; 2018) show the effectiveness of video-based interaction on the longitudinal development of L2 English speakers both in terms of L2 comprehension and production. The experimental group interacted with L1 English speakers while the comparison group had weekly home-assignments to complete (designed to foster their L2 comprehension and production). The findings revealed that the VE group improved significantly more than the comparison group both in L2 comprehension and production.

Elsewhere, Cunningham (2017) studies how requests produced or mitigated by L2 speakers correspond to, or differ from, L1 speaker use during eight video conferences between L2 German learners and L1 German speakers. Based on a multifactorial statistical analysis, his findings suggest that both L1 and L2 speakers mainly use direct requests in their oral and written language production while L2 speakers make less frequent use of internal modifications. He thus argues that VE is a valuable resource for naturalistic pragmatic language use, giving language learners an ideal model from which to learn the target language. In a recent VE study, Canals (2022) found that students tend to negotiate for meaning, offer interactional feedback and pay attention to this feedback more often when English is the language of interaction (as a lingua franca) between Spanish and English language learners.

The video-mediated studies outlined in the previous paragraph largely identify the specific linguistic features used during VE, such as the production of clarification requests and confirmation checks, the mitigation of requests, and the expression of ideologies. Furthermore, these studies are often situated within larger discussions of teacher training, the development of ICC, and language learning (Thorne, 2010). Less common in the video-mediated literature on VE is investigations that look at the discursive organization of telecollaborative practices. The present investigation narrows this empirical gap by examining the sequential organization of topic development and its relevance to researchers and practitioners concerned with language teaching in general, and virtual exchange in particular extending the scope of mainstream VE projects to the (Middle)/East and Asia.

2.2. Topic maintenance in L2 interaction

Topic maintenance is defined by El-Wakai (2018) as "the interactional process of developing a topic through the cooperation of the co-participants" (p. 34). Early research demonstrates that topic maintenance is achieved collaboratively in four primary ways in face-to-face and online interaction: (1) topicalizers (Button & Casey, 1984; Svennevig, 1999), (2) preferred responses (Svennevig, 1999), (3) repetition of prior talk (Sukrutrit, 2010), and (4) asking questions (Button & Casey, 1985; Maynard, 1980). First, topicalizers (e.g., oh really?) show interest and surprise in a proffered topic and can maintain a conversation for a short period of time. Second, preferred responses, including topical items related to the topic-at-hand, are a way of taking up and maintaining a proffered topic. Examples of preferred responses include explicit approval of questions asked by a fellow interlocutor such as accepting an invitation for a party (Sukrutrit, 2010). Third, (partial or complete) repetitions of prior turns or reformulations maintain a topic by displaying interest in a proffered topic. Fourth, asking questions, such as a request for clarification (e.g., what did you mean by ...?), creates additional opportunities to continue a topic of conversation. Furthermore, Maynard (1980) claims that while yes/no questions are not effective in maintaining a current topic, minimal responses (e.g., "uh huh") are better at maintaining a proffered topic because they show understanding and interest (see also reclaimers; Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984).

Supakorn (2017) demonstrates that topic development unfolds in a variety of ways in classroom contexts. She examined topic development in L2 classrooms and illustrated a number of topic maintenance devices following a curtailed response including news announcement and itemised news inquiry (see also Button & Casey, 1984, 1985). In a recent study, Dolce and van Compernelle (2020) reported that student-initiated topic expansions (including topic elaboration and challenges to teacher assertions as resources) created and enhanced L2 learning opportunities of participants in classrooms. El-Wakai (2018) investigates topic management in interactions during student meetings in a problem-based learning environment, highlighting how participants use bodily resources, such as nodding to indicate listenership and head turning to establish gaze with the speaker to manage topics. In a recent study based on dyadic peer interaction within telecollaborative eTandem conversations, Black and Barron (2018) show that cohesion during topic transitions via announcement turns is managed by interactants during face alignment problems through the use of cohesive topic transition devices, such as co-class membership and contrast relations.

While some work has been done on topic maintenance, spanning a small range of interactional phenomena, there remains many opportunities to build on the important research conducted thus far. To this end, the current study describes RBBs, which occur when a student asks a question that reciprocates something that has been asked in a prior turn, inviting a co-participant to continue talking

² Although we acknowledge that video-mediated interaction is not necessarily a part of a virtual exchange in all cases, we mostly use these two terms interchangeably in our study since we have video-mediated interactions within a virtual exchange project.

Line 79- 1##1 Obo leans backwards.

80 ((vibration sound)) (0.8)
 81 → Ago: yes::(0.2) [↑and (.) ↑what about your weeken:d
 +looks at bottom-right +looks at screen
 82 [((outside talk from Ago's room for 2.4 sec.))
 83 Obo: ehm 2#((pouts)) #2 (2.6) err (1.4) i: (0.2) stayed



Line 83- 2##2 Obo pouts for 0.2 sec.

84 (0.4) at home
 85 (0.7)
 86 Ago: tsch .hh (0.4) you are always stayed \$at home\$
 +lateral headshake
 87 Obo: ehm watched
 88 (0.5)
 89 Ago: uh huh

. (continued).

Obo's question ("can you tell me your journey") in the beginning of the extract proffers a topic; after a brief exchange of clarification in lines 4–6, Ago orients to the topic by sharing her experiences with her family members starting from omitted lines until line 77. In line 79, Obo leans backwards (1#) and produces a delayed assessment of Ago's turn(s) ("sounds great"), which could, but need not, be treated by Ago as an opportunity to change topic.

In line 81, instead of changing topics, Ago asks Obo to share what he did over the weekend using a/what about + NP/construction ("what about your weekend?"). This question type is one of several ways RBBs are used to manage topics. In line 83, Obo pouts following a turn initial hesitation, potentially indicating that he is thinking about the topic; and after long intra-turn silences, he orients to the RBB in lines 83 and 84 by providing information about his weekend activities. At this point in the interaction and for the remaining extract, both interactants maintain the current topic.

This example demonstrates how RBBs are used to manage topics. This practice of question reciprocity is similar to what [Maynard and Zimmerman \(1984\)](#) call "return questions" or what [Schegloff \(2007\)](#) refers to as "counters". However, return questions and counters are typically used to move away from what is currently being discussed, while RBBs are used to contribute to a current topic. Furthermore, return questions and counters are commonly uttered immediately after a minimal response to a question directed previously ([Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984](#)); conversely, RBBs are produced after a non-minimal response commonly consisting of several TCUs. That is, return questions and counters are shown to limit topic progressivity while RBBs do not, and thus, they facilitate extended talk in a second language. The analysis below builds on these observations.

3. Data and methodology

This study adopts multimodal conversation analysis ([Mondada, 2019](#)). Multimodal conversation analysis offers a powerful tool to understand how sequences of actions are co-constructed through both talk and embodied practices.

Data come from 9 h of screen recordings of dyadic telecollaborative interactions between 20 Turkish and Kazakh university students (10 from each university) communicating on Skype for a term (three months). The students are 18–24 years of age. Their proficiency levels in English vary between A1 and B1 (CEFR), which are based on placement tests conducted at their respective universities. Both groups of students have different mother tongues (Turkish and Kazakh), and they do not, reportedly, speak English widely outside of university settings. The students were communicating for the purpose of improving their English, yet the "meet up" was not part of a university course nor was it set up for the study. One guide from each institution was responsible for setting up the exchanges, as teachers were not needed for this part of the project ([Helm, 2015](#); [O'Dowd, 2015](#)). The student matching process was carried out by the first author: dyads were (re)/formed randomly apart from ensuring that each group consisted of one Turkish participant and one Kazakh partner. No specific training was given to the participants except for informing them about the details of the process, medium of interaction, video recording software, and submission of video recordings.

The students were allowed to freely discuss any topic; this arrangement took place every two weeks with a different partner. Students were allowed to meet more than once every two weeks: some met more than once while others did not. Although we did not receive recordings from each dyad regularly, each participant had the chance to have three different partners at most while most of them had two different partners. Each meeting lasted for an average of 30 min. Although the students understood that they could use all aspects of Skype communication, they mostly utilized the video-chat function. All participants signed a written consent form allowing their recordings to be used for research purposes and the study was approved by the ethical review board at Hacettepe University (35853172/433-393). Pseudonyms were used throughout the study.

RBBs were identified after examining the transcripts multiple times through a process of "unmotivated looking" ([Sacks, 1984](#)) where no specific interactional features are preselected and used to guide the initial analysis. This identification process led to a collection of 101 examples of topic maintenance work. 73 out of these 101 sequences included successful use of an RBB device in which topic maintenance is achieved. Four representative examples are presented below to demonstrate how RBBs are designed and organized.

4. Analysis and findings

RBB can be defined as an interactional device that invites a co-participant to maintain a current topic of discussion; this is done by asking a question that reciprocates something that has been asked in a prior turn, which typically occurs in a topical boundary: a point in the interaction where the topic could, but need not, change.

Extract 2 that follows is based on Beo and Ana's talk about their universities. The topic begins with Ana's topic initiation question, requesting the name of Beo's university.

Extract 2: University (Beo-Ana/20.12)

Extract 2: University (Beo-Ana/20.12)

1 Ana: uh huh (1.6) errs s- so: °uhhum° (0.6) ↑what abo:ut er
+shifts her gaze to the screen
+raises her eyebrows

2 your <university↓>

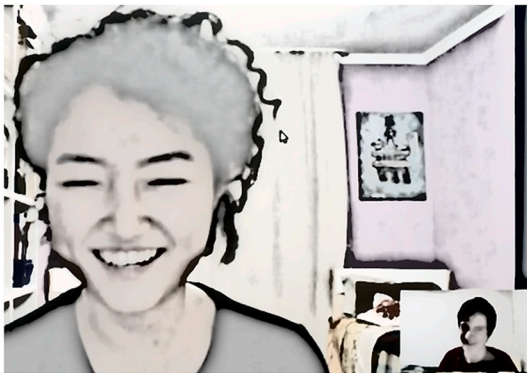
3 Beo: .hh err my university it's (0.7) err ehe (0.2) .hh
 4 (0.2) it's name is very (.) long (1.5) e[rr:]

21 lines omitted

24 Beo: and (0.3) err (1.9) and (0.5) ↑canadian friend (0.8)
+Ana looks downwards *+Ana looks at screen*

25 ((Ana raises her eyebrows))(0.8)for exam[ple (0.7)eh[e
 26 Ana: [°°oww°° [it's
 27 great 1#ehehe#1(.)°\$it's gre2#at\$°(1.0)err3#s:o: er[r:
+Beo giggles *+looks downwards* *+looks upwards*

28→Beo: ↑[how is



Line 27- 1##1 Ana and Beo laughs



Line 27- Ana Looks downwards (2#) and upwards (3#).

29 Ana: i will google °it°
 30 Beo: your school
 31 (1.0)
 32 Ana: how↑ ehe
+leans forwards
 33 (0.4)
 34 Beo: er ↑how is your school [andhh.
+Ana slightly leans back
 35 Ana: [err \$i'm studying in
+nods
 uni↑versition\$
 Beo: err (0.2) maybe: your /üniversiti/ is (0.2) /eljin/
 (0.3) err (0.3) international (0.2) university
 (1.2) ((Ana smiles))
 Ana: ^{4#}yes e ^{#4}he[he \$yeah\$
+nods twice



Line 40- ^{4##4} Ana nods twice.

Beo: [ehehehehe (0.9) er[r
+Ana looks downwards
 Ana: [it's right (0.3) so: ehm (0.3)
 our university is (.) very:: (0.3) big
+looks at screen *+nods*
 (1.0)
 Beo: oww

. (continued).

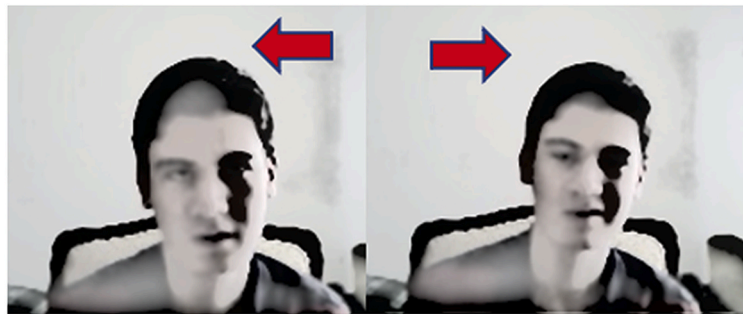


Line 8-9- **1##1** Ana looks downwards.

Line 11- **2#** Ana raises her eyebrows.

13 (1.1)

14 Beo: ehm my exams were (0.8) err(0.8) **3#**good**#3**(0.4) err(.)
+leans +comes closer to +lateral head
backwards screen movement



Line 14- **3##3** Beo moves his head laterally.

15 bothh. (0.6) finally er exam (0.4) err (1.3)was bad
+looks at upper left +raises his
eyebrows and nods

. (continued).

16 Ana: ehe \$li⁴#ke (.)ours\$ ehehe^{#4}
 +nods +Beo laughs



Line 16- 4##4 Ana and Beo laughs.

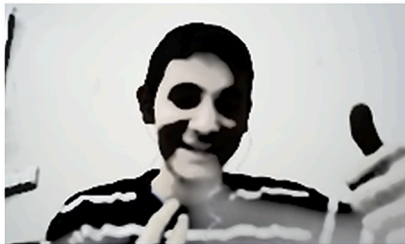
17 ((Beo laughs for 1 sec)) (0.4)
 18 Beo: erm †and (0.3) err (1.0) we have (0.4) err (0.6) we
 +comes closer to screen +
 leans backwards
 19 have (0.6)err next week (0.4) err exam
 +leans forwards +Ana nods
 +nods
 20 (1.2)
 21 Ana: huh hu[:h
 22 Beo: [and (0.7) err (2.0) it err (0.9) it is about
 +Ana comes closer to screen
 23 (1.1) err speaking (0.4) skills
 +Ana nods
 . (continued).

In the first 10 lines of the extract, Ana summarizes a solution for a problem experienced with an exam, during which participants engage in joint laughter (Holt, 2010) (line 5 and 6), while Beo initiates acknowledgement tokens (in line 6, 8 and 11 in an embodied fashion). In lines 10 and 11, Ana initiates a possible topic termination device by summarizing her account (Button, 1991; West & Garcia, 1988), which is also preceded by the discourse marker *so*. After another possible topic-terminating *so* in line 11 (Morris-Adams, 2016), Ana produces an RBB by reciprocating Beo's question regarding exams ("how was your exams"). In lines 14 and 15, Beo provides an account of his exams, which maintains the topic until the end of the extract. In addition to providing the grounds for topic maintenance and thus extended talk in L2, RBB can also lend opportunities for reformulations at the level of grammar. The RBB question in lines 11 and 12 involves a problem of subject-verb agreement, while the response turn of Beo reformulates "was" to "were", thus accurate grammatical use. Although there is no strong evidence that this is noticed and further reformulated by Ana, such exchanges embed "learning potentials" (Hellermann & Pekarek Doehler, 2010) at the level of formulations and reformulations of interactional and grammatical resources.

Extract 4 comes from an encounter between Eko and Aby. Unlike the previous examples, the RBB below is constructed as an/and you/question followed by a *wh* question. The extract begins with Eko talking about playing football, which follows Aby's question about hobbies (this question and initial part of Eko's turn in which he engaged in explaining his hobbies are omitted to save space).

Extract 4: Your Hobbies (Eko-Aby/19.11)

6 (1.5)
 7 → Eko: oka^{3#}:y^{#3} (2.5) er and YOU? and you↑ (.) ↑what is your
 +shows +gets closer +Aby leans towards right
 thumbs up to screen



Line 7- 3### Eko shows thumb up.


8 (0.2) şey <↑what are your hobbi[es]
 well +Aby takes an upright position
 9 Aby: [°err° (0.5) i love
 +raises his +
 hand horizontal
 hand movement
 10 basketball °and° \$football\$
 +Eko shows thumbs up
 11 Eko: ye:s (0.4) err (0.4) do you have any lisans↑ (0.3) in
 +nods **licence**
 12 basketball↑
 +Aby raises his eyebrows
 +Eko moves his hand backwards
 13 (0.9)
 14 Aby: err (0.5) °no:° (0.4) i:: (.) ↑huh and judo [°judo°
 +points +nods
 himself +moves his hand roundly
 15 Eko: ju[do? (0.3)
 +raises his
 eyebrows and nods
 16 ye:s
 +nods

. (continued).

The exchange between Eko and Aby from lines 3 to 6 maintains the discussion of hobbies, though there are several instances during this period that could terminate the topic, including the verbal and nonverbal actions in line 3 (1#) and the joint laughter beginning in line 4 (Jefferson, 1972, 1983; Morris-Adams, 2016). These opportunities to change topics are followed by 1.5 s of silence in line 6 and the discourse marker *okay* in line 7, which is embodied with a thumbs up gesture (3#). After another period of silence of 2.5 s in line 7, Eko constructs an RBB, creating the space to continue the current topic of discussion. This RBB is constructed first as an/and you/-question, which is marked with loud voice and rising intonation. The question is then reformulated as a prototypical reciprocal format in line 8 (“what are your hobbies”). Aby identifies her hobbies in lines 9 and 10, and the extract continues with both interactants maintaining the current topic. Note that in addition to the different question type used, we also observe what is known as a self-initiated self-repair: a self-correction from “what is” to “what are,” suggesting the monitoring of one’s own speech.

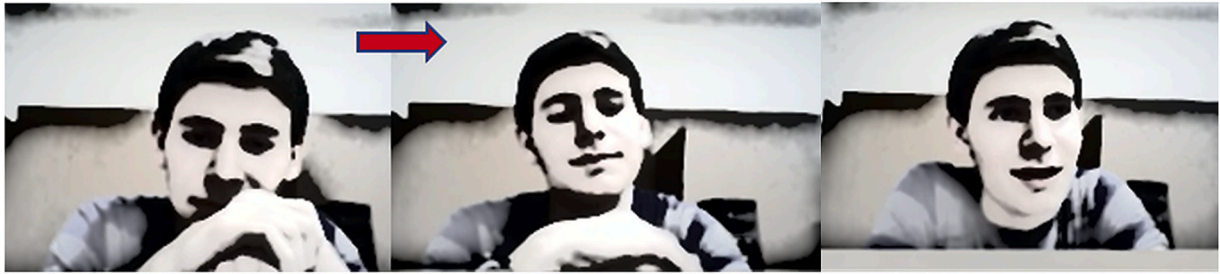
The last extract, taken from an exchange between Eko and Zen talking about movies, demonstrates a phenomenon we repeatedly observed in our dataset: alignment at interactional and linguistic levels. It also is a case in point to show a formulaic question in producing RBBs that has been observed across the dataset.

Extract 5: Harry Potter (Eko-Zen/23.12)

1 Eko: err let's continue: (.) with (.) movies (.) what's
 2 your (0.3) err ↑best movie in your life (0.2) in your
 +extends his hand
 3 whole life.
 4 (0.2) ((Zen leans backwards)) (2.0)
 5 Zen: err it's really hard question because
 6 Eko: ehe
 7 (0.8)
 8 Zen: i don't kno:w
 9 ((Zen looks at screen))
 43 lines omitted
 44 Zen: .hh ^{1#}actually i've read only two books (0.3) bu:t err
 +looks at upper left
 45 (.) in (0.7) vacations i: pla:n (0.5) to: (0.3) to
 46 con- to continue to read (0.2) ^{#1}all the ↑parts of
 +Eko nods
 +looks at screen


Line 44-46- ^{1##1} Zen looks upwards.

47 ^{2#}the° books
 +Eko leans backwards
 48 (0.5)
 49 Eko: ^{#2}okay (0.3) .hh (0.3) that's ithh. (0.8) ^{3#}er[r
 +leans towards screen
 +looks at
 upper left
 50 Zen: [.hh^{#3}

Line 47-49 **2##2** Eko leans backwards.Line 49-50- **3##3** Eko looks at upper left.

51 → **4#**>↑what about< you
+Eko looks at screen
52 (0.7)

Line 51-53- **4##4**
Eko looks at screen.

53 Eko: err it's **#4**a hard question (0.4)in y- in my opinion (.)
+looks at upper right

54 too (1.0) err: (.) i ↑think (0.3) err lord of the
+bows his head+Zen touches her hair +looks at screen

55 rings (0.3) is my best (0.2) series (.) or movies(0.8)
+Zen puts her hand down
+lateral headshake

56 err i: (0.6) i love s- so much(0.5) this (0.2) series
+looks at upper left +looks at screen +
+raises his eyebrows tilts his head

57 (1.8) ↑öyle yani \$that's it↓\$
like that
+lateral headshake
. (continued).

In lines 1 and 3, Eko explicitly orients to the topic of discussion (“let’s continue”) by asking Zen about her “best” movie. After leaning back in line 4, which embodies her orientation to the question, Zen acknowledges the difficulty of the topic in line 5 (it’s really hard question) and uses an uncertainty marker in line 8. The topic unfolds until lines 44–47, when Zen announces that she did not read the books yet, which is in reference to the Harry Potter movies series that was identified as her “best” movie in the preceding omitted lines. She looks slightly upwards during her telling (1#). Eko leans backwards (2#), leans forwards, and then produces an *okay* token with an audible exhalation and an explicit termination device *that’s it* in line 49, signalling a possible sequence closer (Schegloff, 2007; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973; West & Garcia, 1988). Although the space has been created to terminate the current topic, Zen constructs an RBB question (“what about you”) in line 51. Eko also looks upwards (3#) until he receives a RBB question (4#). Eko responds to this reciprocating device by producing topical talk for the remaining portion of this extract. This extract provides further insights into how interactants achieve topical alignment: the use of the particle *too* in line 54 displays that Eko aligns himself with what is previously uttered by his co-interactant, recycling the formulaic response “that is a hard question”. This becomes evidence for alignment at both discourse and linguistic level, showing how extension of topics through RBBs can create opportunities for recycling formulaic utterances while enabling progressivity of topics.

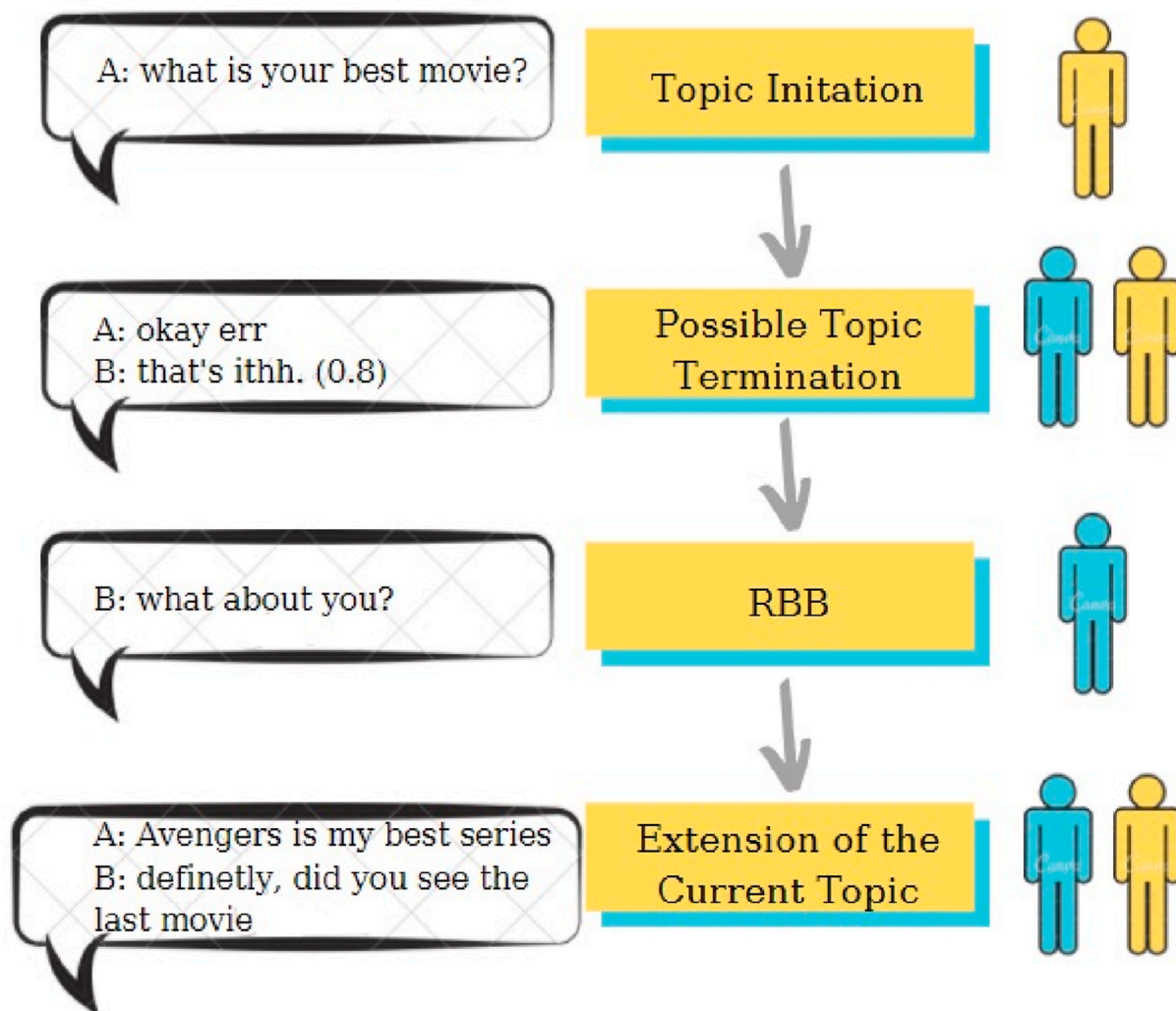


Fig. 1. Sequential environment of RBB.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings demonstrate that RBBs possess a sequential structure,³ following the initiation of a topic, that can be broken into three phases (Fig. 1): (1) a point in the interaction where a topic may come to an end, (2) an information-seeking question (RBB) that is designed to reciprocate what has been asked in a prior exchange, such as */what about + pronoun/or/what about your + noun/*, and (3) an answer to the RBB that extends the discussion of the current topic. These observations are pedagogically significant and interactionally salient in that RBBs allow students to maintain topic progressivity by asking reciprocating questions.

RBBs function as a topic maintenance device by maintaining progressivity in interaction. The device allows interactants to manage intersubjectivity by establishing “reciprocity of perspectives” (Seedhouse, 2004). To be more precise, students can collaboratively construct interactional competence when they achieve mutual understanding through RBB sequences, as they create spaces for topic elaboration. In so doing, students can maintain the progressivity of the topic, which is in line with the institutional goals of this type of interaction.

The reciprocal nature of “rolling it back” enables L2 speakers to perform a number of actions that are important to developing proficiency and competence in a target language, including (1) organizing turn-taking and speakership, (2) recycling linguistic and interactional resources, and (3) displaying topic alignment (Hellermann, 2009; Kasper & Wagner, 2011; Seedhouse, 2004; Watanabe, 2017). RBB devices also create opportunities for communication practice, as they allow students to maintain extended conversations,

³ We would like to thank reviewer 1 who pointed out that RBBs can be related to the preference organization in video-mediated VE, as our participants used RBBs as systematic practices “when they act and react in a variety of interactional situations” (Pomerantz & Heritage 2013, p.210).

which is a common language activity in language classrooms. Developing both declarative and procedural knowledge of how to use RBBs is helpful in that students can manage their turns-at-talk in a sequentially appropriate way while maintaining an ongoing topic of discussion.

Previous research demonstrates that the ability to maintain a topic is a crucial interactional skill in that conversations require topic progressivity. This interactional skill applies to face-to-face interactions in general, and online virtual exchanges in particular (Galaczi, 2008, 2014; Hall & Pekarek Doehler, 2011; Meredith, 2017; Nguyen, 2011; Seedhouse & Supakorn, 2015; Supakorn, 2017; Svennevig, 1999; Walsh, 2012). Topic maintenance is thus a learning object in and of itself, but it also creates other developmental opportunities by allowing students to participate in important classroom activities as well as online exchanges. In other words, the ability to maintain a topic is one of many aspects of interactional competence (Pekarek Doehler, 2018, 2019, 2021; Galaczi, 2008, 2014; Hall & Pekarek Doehler, 2011; Salaberry & Kunitz, 2019; Seedhouse & Supakorn, 2015) that can be taught, yet it also a resource for students to mediate their learning in classrooms (Walsh, 2006).

Furthermore, the organization of topic maintenance creates considerable opportunities for task designers. For example, RBBs can be included in role-playing tasks or conversational games that require students to maintain topics by using practiced strategies/resources, such as topicalizers, preferred responses, repetitions, and questions. Alternatively, these strategies/resources can be incorporated into lessons for test takers of paired speaking tests (such as Cambridge Assessment English), as topic maintenance and progressivity of talk is vital to scoring high in the speaking section of such tests (Hırçın-Çoban & Sert, 2020). Topic maintenance is especially important in speaking examinations, as topic progressivity is “a vehicle and a focus of the interaction” yet organized as a “one-sided” conversational encounter (Seedhouse, 2019; Seedhouse & Supakorn, 2015, p. 411).

With respect to VE, the findings illustrate how RBBs – a topic maintenance device – might contribute to our understanding of progressivity in (online) L2 interaction. That is, L2 speakers that are taught how to maintain a topic will be able to take part in other unstructured, student-managed dyadic interactions. In so doing, said learners can work to a developmental point where they are able to manage their talk at sequential and topical levels without a teacher distributing the turns or deciding on which topics to focus on and for how long. The study also contributes to an understanding of the relation between multimodality and topic maintenance, revealing how verbal and nonverbal actions are deployed in an intertwined yet orderly way during multinational video-mediated conversations. Since research on topic maintenance is still scarce, future studies must examine this empirical issue in both ordinary and institutional settings.

As a mode of communication, video can play a role in how “identities” are performed (Dooly & Davitova, 2018), learning is acquired (Saito & Akiyama, 2018), ICC is developed (Ware, 2013), face is negotiated, interactional troubles are addressed, and social distance is managed (Ko, 2012; Yamada, 2009). Following these findings, it is possible that the video context mediated the use of RBBs by encouraging students to be more attentive to their conversational topics, as students must appear engaged when visible and cannot multitask in the same way as text-based platforms.

The unique affordances of video-mediated platforms are reported on extensively in the literature.⁴ For example, Yamaha and Akahori (2007) find that video communication is likely to encourage interactants to fully reflect their emotional and intellectual identities. In the same vein, Van der Zwaard and Bannink (2019) reveal that language learners make more ‘face appropriate’ decisions during video calls, such as avoiding meaning negotiation (see also Black, 2017). Similarly, avoiding interactional troubles through smile or laughter (Sert & Jacknick, 2015) and silence (Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2019) is more likely to occur during video conversations, as the analyses of, for instance, extracts 2 and 4 have shown. Still other studies demonstrate that video conversations encourage interactants to be aware of their ongoing interaction and be more engaged (Ko, 2012; Yamada, 2009). This need for sustained engagement in video conversations might be one of the drives for the extensive use of RBBs in our dataset.

Similar to Leone (2012), RBBs appear to promote intercultural reciprocity between interactants in that students frequently discussed ICC topics though they were not prescribed conversational topics. Furthermore, VEs create spaces and opportunities for students to use English in naturalistic environments; develop awareness of cultural differences (O’Dowd, 2016a; 2016b), increase their willingness to communicate in target languages (Thorne, 2016), learn about other cultures (Üzüim et al., 2020), gain confidence as L2 speakers, and eliminate problematic stereotypes (O’Dowd, 2021).

It can be said that the lingua franca English virtual exchange examined in this study enabled L2 speakers to experience a degree of interconnectedness with speakers from different cultures (Akiyama & Cunningham, 2018; Lewis & O’Dowd, 2016). Lindner (2016) suggests that interacting in a lingua franca fuels the emergence of a unique culture, enabling interactants to overcome stereotypes while developing a curiosity and awareness of other cultures (Akiyama, 2015; O’Dowd, 2021). Thorne (2010) calls this “intercultural communication in the wild” and describes it as “situated in arenas of social activity that are less controllable than classroom or organized online intercultural exchanges might be, but which present interesting, and perhaps even compelling, opportunities for intercultural exchange, agentive action, and meaning making” (p. 144). In a world with increase human migration and mobility, language teachers should consider using video-mediated VEs to promote and facilitate global citizenship (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; O’Dowd, 2020; Üzüim et al., 2020).

A potential limitation of our study is that it does not compare video-mediated VE to other forms of VE to show if RBBs are more common or unique to video-mediated interactions. In addition, there is still a lot to investigate in emerging virtual exchange environments and their integration into L2 language teaching and learning curricula, in particular less commonly taught/researched languages. Therefore, we would like to call for future research on the phenomenon that focuses on other forms of VE (text-based chat,

⁴ We would like to thank reviewer 2 for encouraging us to emphasize the importance of video modality and the role of the unique nature of our VE environment in facilitating RBBs.

etc.). One potential research idea is to carry out a comparative re-production research (Markee, 2017), which would include a qualitative form of replication. Indeed, there are a number of studies that observe the importance of using discourse-based approaches to understand the connections between virtual exchange and different aspects of intercultural and communicative competences (Üzüm et al., 2020). Although there is much work to be done in this regard, especially from a conversation analytic perspective, the present study represents a small step forward in understanding the pedagogical, interactional, and cultural benefits of virtual exchange.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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Appendix A. Jefferson Transcription Convention (2004)

[]	Overlapping utterances – (beginning [] and (end))
=	Contiguous utterances (or continuation of the same turn)
(0.4)	Represent the tenths of a second between utterances
(.)	Represents a micro-pause (1 tenth of a second or less)
:	Elongation (more colons demonstrate longer stretches of sound)
.	Fall in pitch at the end of an utterance
-	An abrupt stop in articulation
?	Rising in pitch at utterance end (not necessarily a question)
CAPITAL	Loud/forte speech
<u> </u>	Underline letters/words indicate accentuation
↑↓	Marked upstep/downstep in intonation
°°	Surrounds talk that is quieter
hhh	Exhalations
.hhh	Inhalations
he or ha	Laugh particle
(hhh)	Laughter within a word (can also represent audible aspirations)
> <	Surrounds talk that is spoken faster
< >	Surrounds talk that is spoken slower
(())	Analyst notes
()	Approximations of what is heard
\$ \$	Surrounds 'smile' voice

Appendix B. Transcription Conventions Adopted from Balaman & Sert (2017b)

1#	Onset point of the on-screen activity surrounding the talk that is marked along with the lines of the transcript
#1	Offset point of the on-screen activity surrounding the talk that is marked along with the lines of the transcript
lines 2–5	Duration of on-screen activity represented across lines in order to indicate the scope of each description

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