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Symbolic Competence in Interaction: Mutuality, Memory, and Resistance in a Peer Tutoring Context

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Symbolic competence (Kramersch, 2009, 2011) has been proposed as a crucial addition to world language learning, as it enables a language learner to negotiate the complex symbolism of words, expressions, and discursive events from the target culture in order to reference them effectively and in the appropriate contexts. However, fostering symbolic competence is still a challenge within the day to day reality of the world language classroom. Moreover, there is still little research on what symbolic competence looks like in interaction. In this article I examine a peer tutoring context as one possibility for examining symbolic competence in interaction. Using a close discourse analysis of one peer tutoring session, I explore the intersections between interactional resources and the performance of symbolic competence. I show how the peer tutor's enthusiastic and lengthy descriptions of a Mexican television program from the 70s constituted what I term a *symbolic performance* of her knowledge of this cultural artifact. At the same time, the peer learner's reactions to these explanations, particularly her increasing lack of alignment, revealed resistance and interactional asynchrony between the two individuals. I examine reasons for this asynchrony, focusing on the difficulties of fostering symbolic competence in traditionally communicative-based language learning environments despite the potential richness that a peer tutoring environment could provide for transformative language learning. I suggest ways in which symbolic competence could be cultivated in peer tutoring and other additional language learning contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Communicative language teaching, the dominant paradigm for decades, has come up against a strong backlash by several researchers in additional language acquisition. While some scholars, such as those in the “focus on form” movement (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002; Plonsky & Loewen, 2013), advocate more explicit instruction in the structural aspects of languages, others have questioned the very core of the communicative approach, noting a dearth of focus on such issues as intercultural understanding (Byram, 2014; Koike & Lacorte, 2014) and social justice (Glynn, Weseley, & Wassell, 2014). What is lacking, note these authors, is something that empowers language learners to make meaningful connections to the myriad symbols and contexts of the target culture in the “real world,” and to incorporate these connections into their own daily discourses.

Among these latter scholars is Kramersch (2009, 2011), who has argued that by teaching a standardized language and idealizing a generic native speaker norm, exclusive use of the communicative method discourages intercultural competence and transformative language learning. Stated Kramersch (2009), “The emphasis in language teaching is on language as reference and representation rather than on language as symbolic power” (p. 10). To incorporate symbolic knowledge into language learning, a new framework is needed, one

that perceives language as “a meaning-making system” that “constructs the historical sedimentation of meanings that we call our ‘selves’” (p. 2). This framework, which Kramsch called *symbolic competence*, would emphasize the creative and polycentric aspects of meaning making, opening up spaces in which language learners could dialogue with their initial interpretations. In the process, they would develop multifaceted, multilingual identities that challenge and reflect their own personal histories vis-à-vis the histories of persons in the target culture.

While the notion of symbolic competence has been well received among language scholars, with several researchers proposing innovative pedagogical approaches based on this framework (e.g., Kaiser & Shibahara, 2014; Kearney, 2012; Vinall, 2016), it is still difficult to reconcile the goals of fostering symbolic competence with the day-to-day reality of the language classroom. Moreover, there is still little research on what symbolic competence looks like in interaction, with most scholars highlighting its relational, reframing potential, while glossing over the historic and cultural content necessary to participate in this reframing.

In this article, I demonstrate that conveying knowledge about the symbolic value of target language words and artifacts is a necessary, albeit insufficient, first step in developing symbolic competence. I approach symbolic competence in interaction as the *performance* of cultural memories and history, and demonstrate how even this most elemental level of symbolic competence can come up against resistance in a language learning context. The peer-tutoring environment, as a more egalitarian and less anxiety provoking space than the traditional classroom, provides a rich opportunity for learners to negotiate and mediate target language symbolic knowledge with peer tutors, critically comparing it with their own personal histories. However, at times students’ histories as language learners, imbued with the communicative-based emphasis on language as referent, create an environment in which they resist or contest symbolic knowledge.

I explore the negotiation of symbolic competence through a close discourse analysis of one peer-tutoring session between a tutor, Gloria, and a learner, Alicia. As the participants worked together on comprehension of an assigned article, Gloria’s enthusiastic and lengthy descriptions of a Mexican television program from the 70s constituted what I term a *symbolic performance* of her knowledge of this cultural artifact. At the same time, Alicia’s reactions to and reconstructions of Gloria’s explanations, combined with Gloria’s insistence on continuing these monologues, revealed some resistance or interactional asynchrony between the two individuals. Even though the learner-requested task was eventually completed, a variety of factors made Gloria unable to adequately perform her symbolic competence in a way that Alicia could take up, analyze, and reframe. Thus, my research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How did the peer tutor and peer learner perform and resist symbolic competence in this interaction?
2. What interactional elements indexed symbolic performance?
3. What interactional, historical, and pedagogical elements may inhibit the “full” performance of symbolic competence (e.g., reframing and repositioning symbolic knowledge)?

Findings from this study highlight the difficulty of fostering symbolic competence in

traditionally communicative-based language learning environments, even as they point to the potential richness that this framework could provide for transformative language learning. In my use of close discourse analysis, I explore the possible intersections between the theory of symbolic competence and how we can witness this competence, or lack thereof, in interaction. Lastly, I suggest ways in which symbolic competence could be cultivated in peer tutoring and other additional language learning contexts.

FINDING SYMBOLIC COMPETENCE

A wide body of research on discourse and interaction has emphasized the emergent and context-specific nature of identity work, both in and out of L2 learning contexts (e.g., Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Korobov, 2010). Recently, the role of histories and symbols and our ability to recognize, inhabit, and reframe these elements have been highlighted as potential points of analysis for both naturalistic and classroom discourse, as well as important elements of language learning. Kramsch (2006) argued that cross-cultural communication implied that learners understand not only the surface level of discourse, but also “what they remember from the past, what they imagine and project onto the future, and how they position themselves in the present” (p. 251). Working from this interpretation, Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) defined symbolic competence as the ability to strategically access these relationships, thereby positioning oneself within and across different symbolic spaces with particular cultural memories and social symbolic power. The ability to access not only linguistic codes, but also “the various spatial and temporal resonances of these codes,” is a key characteristic of multilingual, multicultural individuals (p. 664).

For this reason, symbolic competence has been advocated as a key goal for language learners. While not discounting the importance of communicative competence, Kramsch (2011) argued that symbolic competence “includes a systematic reflexive component that encompasses some subjective and aesthetic as well as historical and ideological dimensions that communicative language teaching (CLT) has largely left unexploited” (p. 355). Recent approaches to symbolic competence have emphasized its reflexive, transcultural, and emergent components, which allow interlocutors to not only interpret utterances, but also develop consciousness of how meanings are manipulated, in this way reframing the content and context of interactions by drawing from shared semiotic resources (Baker, 2016; Hult, 2014; Kearney, 2010, 2012).

Symbolic competence has been taken up as a framework in several research settings, with numerous applied linguists using it for their analyses of multilingual, multicultural subjects (e.g., Back, 2013; Hult, 2014), world language teacher education (e.g., Palpacuer-Lee, 2010), and, most abundantly, language classroom pedagogy (e.g., Kaiser & Shibahara, 2014; Kearney, 2012; Vinall, 2016). A handful of these studies have used ethnographic methods and discourse analysis to examine how symbolic competence is displayed in interaction. For example, Palpacuer-Lee (2010) analyzed the discourse of world language teachers in a French museum and their practices of cultural and intercultural mediation. Similar to my own findings, Palpacuer-Lee discovered that those who were positioned, or positioned themselves, as experts were imbued with symbolic power, but that this power could be reframed through discursive and non-verbal strategies, such as silences and the use of humor. For this reason, the author proposed that the discourse of symbolic competence is often “the negotiation of ambivalences” (p. 326).

Indeed, the ambivalent, emergent nature of symbolic competence and its potential to reach over and through multiple cultures and languages has been the greatest challenge for pedagogical applications. In response to this difficulty, Kearney (2012), Kaiser and Shibahara (2014), and Vinall (2016) proposed strategies for encouraging the development of symbolic competence in the classroom. Kearney (2012) discussed the use of what she termed *cultural narratives*—“the multiple (sometimes competing), conventionalized storylines that cultural groups produce and use to make sense of and attribute meaning to their shared experiences”—to enable language learners to take different, situated perspectives on culture and history (p. 59). Kaiser and Shibahara (2014) employed assignments structured around films that allowed students to reframe and reposition themselves as subjects of alternative discourses. Finally, Vinall (2016) used various iterations of the Mexican myth of *La Llorona* to encourage learners to step outside of traditional interpretations and inhabit the “in-between spaces” that these alternative texts provoked (p. 4). Her three-pronged pedagogical approach of relationality, transgression, and potentiality repositioned symbolic competence as “the potential to become aware of and critically reflect on and act on the crossing of multiple borders between linguistic codes and cultural meanings, the self and others, various timescales and historical contexts, and power structures” (p. 5).

While all of these strategies may indeed foster symbolic competence among language learners, we are still far from having a clear picture of whether or how learners take up, play with, and even resist the symbolic knowledge and relational pedagogies expressed by their interlocutors. Moreover, while many researchers (myself included) have managed to tease out the reframing and relational aspects of symbolic competence in interaction, the initial stages encompassing historicity, or “what [individuals] remember from the past” have not been taken up with the same level of detail (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 251). In other words, we have not yet developed answers to the questions posed by Vinall (2016): “How do we recognize symbolic competence? What does it look like? What are its features? How do we know when someone has it?” (p. 3).

To further flesh out manifestations of symbolic competence in language learning environments, I offer a close discourse analysis of interaction in the context of peer tutoring. I link the notion of symbolic competence with interactional frameworks, such as Moranski and Toth’s (2016) concept of mutuality and Atkinson, Churchill, Nishino, and Okada’s (2007) interpretations of alignment and co-construction (more on these concepts can be found in the following sections). I also employ my own notion of *symbolic performance* (Back, 2013, 2015), which I define as the expression of symbolic competence in interaction. These performances can encompass one or various levels of symbolic competence, from the presentation of histories and memories in a way that highlights knowledge of the symbolic value of words and artifacts, to the co-construction of shared symbolic knowledge, to the reframing and repositioning that has been described in previous literature.

In employing the notion of symbolic performance, I adhere to an interactional perspective on symbolic competence (versus the interior/cognitive dimensions suggested by the term *competence*), emphasize its highly relational nature, and accentuate the close relationship between understanding and performing the various levels of symbolic knowledge. Symbolic performance correlates with Kramsch and Whiteside’s (2008) earlier analysis of symbolic competence, which described the manipulation of different symbolic codes as a performative act that created and reframed interactions. Moreover, an emphasis on performance acknowledges alternative interpretations of symbolic competence, such as Canagarajah’s (2013) notion of performative competence. By focusing on how symbolic

competence is performed, I pinpoint some of the various levels of historicity indexed in the focal peer-tutoring interaction of this study, as well as the potential for negotiating, reframing, and resisting symbolic knowledge.

PEER TUTORING AND ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Although contexts of collaborative learning are generally perceived as beneficial for learners of additional languages, several studies have pointed to the added value of a more knowledgeable interlocutor, such as a peer tutor. Researchers have highlighted the benefits for both tutors and tutees, which include learning through teaching (Mynard & Almarzouqi, 2006), better organization of collaborative learning (Huong, 2007), greater ownership of the learning process (Young & Miller, 2004), improvements in self-concept and self-esteem (Gisbert & Font, 2008), and learners' more favorable self-positioning in the target culture (Meadows, 2010).

However, other researchers have been quick to note drawbacks of peer tutoring, specifically with respect to the often asymmetrical nature of the relationship. For example, differing expectations on the part of the tutee and tutor may lead tutors to adopt a more teacher-centered role during peer-tutoring sessions (Beasley, 1997; Thonus, 2004). This teacher-centered positioning often results in peer tutors talking more than learners and asking closed questions, consequently restricting learner involvement (Thurston, Duran, Cunningham, Blanch, & Topping, 2009; Trimbur, 1987). It appears, therefore, that although peer tutoring offers the potential for increased interaction and, through this, negotiation of symbolic competence, the issues described previously can inhibit these benefits.

Unequal exchanges in peer tutoring and other contexts with what Huong (2007) termed more knowledgeable peers may result from a lack of pedagogical training. With respect to language learning, peer tutors are often solicited only for their language skills, and are rarely trained in methods to elicit conversation. Additionally, the dual, often competing functions of peer and tutor may leave some peer tutors confused about their roles. This negotiation of roles was an important aspect of Moranski and Toth's (2016) analysis of Spanish L2 development in small group work. The authors noted two important conversational features: *mutuality*, which implied an agreement upon roles by all parties; and *equality*, or the amount of participation by each member. These two features complemented each other and, when combined, contributed to more egalitarian exchanges in small group work. In peer-tutoring settings, notions of both mutuality and equality can vary between tutor and learner; the learner and tutor may perceive the tutor's role differently (mutuality), which may in turn contribute to less egalitarian interactions.

Because symbolic competence is a relational construct (Vinall, 2016), a lack of interactional mutuality could pose difficulties for the critical analysis and reframing of symbolic knowledge. Conversely, an egalitarian tutor-learner relationship with mutually agreed-upon roles could foster a rich environment for the cultivation of symbolic competence. In this article, I show how mutuality and symbolic competence were displayed and performed, and the role this played in the focal learner's understanding of the cultural artifact being discussed.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data used for this study are part of a larger corpus of digital video and audio recordings from a peer-tutoring program in the Spanish department of a mid-sized public university in Southern California. Lacking the funds for a language laboratory, the department created the peer-tutoring program for Spanish learners to practice their oral communication skills with so-called “native speakers”—a term used by the department that was not necessarily taken up by the peer tutors themselves, who were usually third- or fourth-year Spanish majors or had close contact with Spanish majors. Peer tutors received independent study credits for their participation in the program. Aside from a brief orientation session at the beginning of the quarter, no training was given.

Participation in the peer-tutoring program was mandatory for language learners in the first through sixth quarters of Spanish; as part of their participation grade, each student was required to sign up for at least one 45-minute peer-tutoring session per week. The objectives for the peer-tutoring program were explained during the orientation, in the tutoring materials, and, for the learners, during class time and in the syllabus. Tutors were not allowed to assist with homework or answer questions about grammar or vocabulary; this rule was explicitly stated in the course syllabi for all levels of Spanish. Instead, students and tutors were required to use the oral communication materials for the day, which were accessible in binders in the tutoring area. These materials included pronunciation exercises, interview questions, short definitions, and listening comprehension activities. Students in first through fourth quarter Spanish were expected to restrict their conversations to these activities during the session. However, students in the fifth and sixth quarters had more flexibility in their tasks, perhaps because mandatory peer tutoring had been made a policy for these levels the year the study took place; for this reason, the language program coordinator had not yet developed sufficient oral practice materials. As a result, solicitations for coursework assistance occurred frequently in peer-tutoring sessions for fifth and sixth quarter students, even though such requests were expressly prohibited.

Upon noticing that “off task” interactions were frequent occurrences, I began to examine them further in order to see whether the peer tutors attempted to steer the interaction back to the original objectives of conversational practice. I discovered that most peer tutors had little issue with deviating from the original intent of the tutoring sessions, and frequently helped with assignments from the classroom. Gloria was one such peer tutor; in her tutoring sessions, learners frequently took the lead in terms of the purpose of the interaction. However, the particular session analyzed in this study was somewhat atypical for both Gloria and the peer tutors due to the level of enthusiasm that Gloria expressed for the subject matter. For this reason, I became interested in whether or not symbolic competence was at play and could be detected in the interaction.

I collected video and audio data from peer-tutoring sessions held during the spring quarter of 2011, with the assistance of several student researchers. I then transcribed and analyzed these data using close discourse analysis that included descriptions of gestures and eye gaze. I also focused on discursive features of *alignment*, that is, moments when a learner comes into “coordinated interaction” with the target language with a full array of “sociocognitive affordances,” including “tools, individuals [and] historical trajectories” (Atkinson et al., 2007, p. 171). Discursive and non-verbal features were analyzed, following Atkinson et al.’s description of co-construction as realized “through the simultaneous use of linguistic and other semiotic tools, including eye gaze, bodily orientation, memory, gesture,

facial expressions, laughter, repetition [...] voice speed, intonation, volume, overlap, and latching” (p. 177; see Appendix for transcription conventions). Again, I was interested in whether a relationship could be established between interactional expressions of alignment/co-construction and the performance of symbolic competence.

In the following analysis, I supplement a close discourse analysis with background information on the cultural artifact under discussion: Mexican humorist Roberto Gómez Bolaños and his 1970s television show, *El Chapulín Colorado* [The Red Grasshopper]. By outlining not only the cultural significance of *El Chapulín Colorado*, but also how both tutor and tutee oriented to this significance, I hope to provide a clearer picture of the symbolic resources that were and were not taken up in this interaction.

ANALYSIS

The discursive event being analyzed occurred in 2011, midway through the spring quarter. Alicia began the tutoring session by soliciting Gloria’s assistance with an online article that she had been assigned to present in class. The article, entitled “Chespirito consigue 250.000 seguidores en Twitter en apenas dos días” [Chespirito obtains 250,000 Twitter followers in just two days] (Agencia EFE, 2011), discussed the launch of a famous Mexican comedian’s Twitter account and the resulting enthusiasm from his fans. The comedian in question, Roberto Gómez Bolaños, was also known as Chespirito, a Spanish rendering of “Shakespeare-ito” or “Little Shakespeare,” for his humorous plays on words. Bolaños had two main comedic television shows in the 70s and 80s: *El Chavo* [The Kid] and *El Chapulín Colorado*. These shows were extremely popular both in Bolaños’ native Mexico and throughout Latin America, where he was a much loved figure; during his funeral in November 2014, scores of children and adults dressed as El Chavo and El Chapulín Colorado thronged the streets of Mexico City as Bolaños’s casket passed by (Agencia AFP, 2014).

Most of the interaction analyzed below focused on *El Chapulín Colorado* and its eponymous main character; for this reason, I provide some additional background information. Bolaños stated that he created El Chapulín Colorado as a critical response to the traditional, fearless superheroes of Batman and Superman. His reasons, outlined in an interview that occurred on the 35th anniversary of the series, are worth citing verbatim:

En mi tiempo hay un exceso de Supermanes y Batmans y todas esas cosas; y yo quería hacer una crítica a nivel mexicano o latinoamericano, es decir con muy poco dinero, sin recursos, sin inventos sensacionales, débil, tonto [...] pero valiente porque se enfrenta el Chapulín a los problemas, consciente de su debilidad, de todo eso; y así me ha pasado a mí, me dan miedo todas las cosas. (Bolaños, in Pérez, 2005)

[In my time there is an excess of Supermans and Batmans and all of those things; and I wanted to make a critique at the level of Mexico or Latin America, that is, with very little money, without resources, without sensational inventions, weak, stupid [...] but brave, because Chapulín faces problems while being conscious of his weakness, of all of that; and that has happened to me, I am afraid of everything.]¹

¹ Unless indicated, all translations are mine.

Thus, El Chapulín Colorado possessed no special powers and only a handful of simple tools to enable him in his crime fighting missions. He was also ridiculously garbed in a red leotard and bobbing antennae (Figure 1), and most of his attempts at crime fighting included slapstick humor at the hero's expense. Still, despite his physical deficiencies, El Chapulín Colorado's cleverness, or *astucia*, enabled him to save the day in every episode. Bolaños's extensive use of parody and physical humor led many to interpret El Chapulín Colorado as an everyman or anti-hero, with scholars such as Aguasaco (2014) describing him as a "superhéroe de una forma no super-heróica" [superhero in non-super-heroic form] (p. 27).



Figure 1. El Chapulín Colorado²

Aguasaco (2014) in particular found in the subject of El Chapulín Colorado a powerful statement on Latin American modernity and globalization, as seen in the following comment on the phrase "¡No contaban con mi astucia!", which figures largely in the data analyzed in this article.

El eslogan del Chapulín Colorado, '¡No contaban con mi astucia!' [...] [r]evela la manera en que la lengua y la idea de la nación se utilizan para asegurarse un mercado que se convierte en un espacio de disputa ideológica en la que la fuerza de lo residual, del pasado, es arma de batalla de las elites latinoamericanas que en los 70s afrontan el reto de la globalización del mercado trasladando las fronteras físicas a espacios discursivos. La parodia emerge como forma excepcional para representar

² Source: <http://comicvine.gamespot.com/forums/battles-7/el-chapulin-colorado-with-prep-vs-the-joker-524294/>

las contradicciones irresueltas, funciona como vehículo ideal para difundir discursos populistas evidentemente contradictorios puesto que les permite ser y no ser, decir sin decir. La parodia tiene la flexibilidad del símbolo populista y su capacidad de articular contradicciones sin resolverlas. (p. 235)

[El Chapulín Colorado's slogan, "¡No contaban con mi astucia!" [...] reveals the way in which language and the concept of nation are used to ensure a market converted into a space of ideological dispute in which the force of the residual, of the past, is a weapon of Latin American elites, who in the 70s confronted the challenges of globalization, traversing physical borders and discursive spaces. Parody emerges as an exceptional way to represent unresolved contradictions, functioning as an ideal vehicle to diffuse populist and evidently contradictory discourses that permit being without being, saying without saying. Parody has the flexibility of the populist symbol and its capacity to articulate contradictions without resolving them.]

While Gloria did not take up any similarly academic parallels between *El Chapulín Colorado* and Latin American populism, the tutor's interactions with Alicia do index the former's symbolic memories of the character and its creator, as well as her perception of El Chapulín Colorado as an iconic figure in Mexican popular culture. She first demonstrated her admiration of Bolaños in their initial interactions around the article, as seen in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1
 "Mi ídolo"

22. G: **de qué se trata el artículo.**
what is the article about.
 ((points with index finger at A))
23. A: u:um, hhHH (.) **no leí**
I didn't read [it]
 ((gaze to paper))
24. A: **pero (.) es umm (1.8) sobre (3.4) chesPIRItu?**
but it's about chesPIRItu?
- ((furrows brow and looks at G))
25. G: **CHESpirito.**
26. A: **CHESpirito.**
27. G: **mi ídolo.**
my idol.
28. A: (3.5) ((turns gaze to G and mouths "mi ídolo"))
29. G: my idol

30. A: **mi ídol[o?]**
31. G: [oh]hh HEheheh
((shakes head slightly and moves hand in a waving away fashion))
32. A: (1.0) **a veces yo um↓**
sometimes I
33. (2.0) ((turns gaze to wall behind G, begins back-and-forth gesture with index finger))
34. **mirE.** ((releases gesture, returns gaze to G))
watched.
35. G: **miraste sus, aum↓ series?**
you watched his shows?
((A nods))
36. A:(.)((gazes down, then back to G))**sí.°a veces°**
yes. sometimes
37. **[con mis]**
with my
((gaze to paper))
38. G: **[como el] chavo del ocho?**
like El Chavo del Ocho?
39. A: **sí.** HHhhh ←
yes.
((returns gaze to G))
40. G: () **ES CLásico.**
it's (a) classic.
41. **po-**((returns gaze to A)) **para mexicanos es un**
fo- for Mexicans it's a
42. **°clásico°=**
classic
((A returns gaze to G))
43. A: =↑**si↓ mis (.)** **abuelos me gus-, me gus- no.**
yes my grandparents like m- like m- no.
((gaze to paper)) ((gaze to ceiling))
44. ***le gus- TAN (2.0) mucho?**
like them a lot? ((gaze briefly to G))

45. G: mhm ((nods slightly))

46. A: yeah. mkay. ((returns gaze to paper))

In this excerpt, Gloria and Alicia began to co-construct some common awareness of Chespirito (Bolaños) and his television programs. This co-construction is evident in such interactional displays of alignment as direct gazes, expressions of agreement (nods and the use of yes [sí]), overlaps, and laughter. Gloria referred to Chespirito as her “idol,” indicating both knowledge of and admiration for the Mexican humorist, while Alicia mentioned that she sometimes watched Chespirito’s television programs. Additionally, Gloria and Alicia engaged in some co-construction of Alicia’s family background; when Gloria stated that Chespirito’s series, *El Chavo* (also known as *El Chavo del Ocho*) is a “classic” “for Mexicans.” Alicia immediately latched onto this evaluation, stating that her grandparents “really liked” the series. In this way, Alicia not only expressed familiarity with the show, but also hinted at her heritage culture identity by implying that her grandparents were Mexican.

Yet, despite the initial co-construction of a shared history, there is already a notable absence of mutuality in this exchange. While Gloria appeared to be evoking their joint knowledge of Chespirito and his television programs, Alicia spent most of her turns on grammatical self-correction, positioning Gloria as an evaluator of her output. The most obvious example of this is in lines 43-46, in which Alicia attempted to construct the phrase “[a] mis abuelos les gusta mucho” [my grandparents like (the television series)]. After various false starts, Alicia delivered her final attempt with an upraised tone, indicating a desire for evaluation. However, even though Alicia did not form the construction correctly (a common error for students of Spanish), Gloria offered little more than a slight nod in response to the tutee’s upraised tone, suggesting a “let it pass” attitude common in lingua franca interactions (Canagarajah, 2013), but not necessarily in a language learning context. Despite this reactive token, which in everyday lingua franca conversation would prolong the conversation, Alicia returned her gaze to her paper, indicating that she had received the evaluation she requested with her upraised tone. Alicia’s emphasis on delivering a grammatically correct phrase, coupled with her gaze breaks, which became more and more frequent as the interaction continued, began to suggest that Alicia had assigned a different role to Gloria than the latter had assumed for herself. This in turn led to an interaction that was less and less equal in terms of time at talk.

Gloria and Alicia began reading and discussing the article for several turns before arriving at a lexical item that led to an extensive explanation on Gloria’s part (Excerpt 2). In the following excerpt, Alicia explicitly requested an explanation or definition of the word “astucia”—a word that constitutes part of an iconic phrase in *El Chapulín Colorado*, as previously mentioned. The article dedicated one sentence to the phrase as having “formed part of the memory of millions of children” [*forman parte de la memoria de millones de niños*]; therefore, there were no contextual cues in the article from which Alicia could draw for a definition.

Excerpt 2

“¿Qué es astucia?”

115. A: um, ↑qué es, astucia astucIa?

what is astuteness astuteness?

116. G:>**no** **contAban con mi astUcia** ←
 you didn't count on my astuteness
 ((smiling))
117. (1.2)((A keeps gaze on paper))
118. like↓ ahm:m↓ no- like, you didn't
 ((A turns gaze to G))
119. (.) like you didn't EXPECT me °or°
120. you didn't[cou-]
121. A: [ohhhhhh]
 ((returns gaze to paper))
122. G: like, you didn't
123. A: >count on me=
 ((gaze to G))
124. G: >COUNT on me.<
125. A: °OKAY got ya° ((returns gaze to paper))

In line 116, Gloria responded to Alicia's query by repeating the word "astucia" as part of a collocation: "¡No contaban con mi astucia!" Gloria's smile indexed both her familiarity with El Chapulín Colorado's iconic phrase and, perhaps, the memories that it evoked of watching the television show. Because Alicia had mentioned watching Bolaños's programs, Gloria's recitation of the phrase, accompanied with a smile and extended eye gaze, was an attempt to perform this symbolic knowledge and again, possibly, connect her own personal histories with those of Alicia, similar to the interaction in Excerpt 1.

However, Alicia's silence and maintained gaze on her paper in line 117 indicated a lack of alignment with Gloria's collocation and corresponding smile. Perhaps realizing this, Gloria offered the phrase "you didn't expect me" (line 119) as a referential equivalent in English of the entire phrase. As Alicia pondered this translation, she turned her gaze to Gloria, then confirmed her receipt of the translation in line 121 with the utterance "ooohhhh," a *change-of-state token*, which "makes a claim that the recipient has undergone an epistemological transition—from 'not-knowing' to 'now-knowing'" (Greer, Bussinger, Butterfield, & Mischinger, 2009, p. 6). Alicia also confirmed receipt—and her readiness to transition to the next topic—by returning her gaze to the paper, as she did upon completion of Gloria's "evaluation" in Excerpt 1. Once again, these indications of transition readiness positioned Gloria as a provider of referential knowledge, leaving little room for meaning-making interaction around the subject of El Chapulín Colorado. Yet Gloria did not take up this positioning—or, at the very least, she was not satisfied with the definition she provided. She reworked her translation of "no contaban con mi astucia" into another co-construction with

((swings imaginary mallet))

136. A: hhOH okay ←

137. G: **de: y tiene un corazon?**

of and he has a heart

((forms thumbs and index fingers into heart shape on chest))

138. A: ((nods))

139. G: **con una C y un H?**

with a C and an H?

((G writes C and H with index finger on chest))

140. A: hhHHHh

In this portion of the interaction, Gloria's extravagant hand gestures and questioning tone at the end of each turn commanded, and held, Alicia's attention; Alicia maintained her gaze on Gloria throughout the exchange and responded to each of Gloria's comprehension checks with a nod or reactive tokens such as "aha" or "okay." Gloria seemed to be setting the scene for Alicia by performing through words and gesture the physical character of El Chapulín Colorado, from his antennae to his mallet to the heart with a "CH" inscribed upon his chest. This performance was not only literal but also symbolic, as it invoked Gloria's own memories of what she considered the character's most important physical attributes.

Yet Alicia, though she demonstrated alignment at an interactional level, did not appear to align to these descriptions of El Chapulín Colorado with any historic or symbolic standpoint of her own. Her reaction "hhOH okay" in line 136 seemed to index a reaction to Gloria's description and pantomime of a mallet, rather than a jarred memory of El Chapulín Colorado. Similarly, her laughter in line 140 was not necessarily a confirmation of understanding, but more likely a humored response to Gloria's drawing of the letters C and H on her chest. Rather than aligning Gloria's memories to her own through repetition or, perhaps, additional descriptions, Alicia continued her positioning of Gloria as information provider by engaging in brief reactive tokens, gazes, and laughter that indexed the reception of referential information.

In the final excerpt we note a further absence of mutuality and, thus, equal exchange, as Alicia's attention was increasingly drawn back to what she had determined to be the task at hand—comprehension of the assigned article. We see this through Alicia's repeated gaze breaks and abbreviated reactive tokens as Gloria continued to situate the lexical item "astucia."

Excerpt 4

"Los personajes tienen sus frases"

147. G: **o::este: SIEMPRE**

or um always

((A returns gaze to G))

148. **antes de que apareciera, las personas siempre**
before he appeared, the people would always
149. **decían ↑oh ahora quien podrá defendernos?**
say now who will be able to defend us?
150. **y él sería ↑YO**
and he would be like ME!
 ((G puts hands on hips))
151. **↓y todos decían ↑EL CHAPULIN COLORADO**
and everyone would say the red grasshopper
 ((G raises hands, A smiles, returns gaze to paper))
152. **ES una frase, >y después decían**
it's a phrase, and then they would say
 ((points to A's paper))
153. **>decía eso.<**
he would say that
154. ((A returns gaze to G and raises eyebrows))
155. G: **tiene: >LOS personajes tienen sus frases?**
he has characters have their phrases?
 ((uses fingers to form a rectangular shape in front of her face))
156. A: mhm
157. G: **que lo hacen famoso a ↑él**
that make him(them) famous
 ((releases gesture))
158. A: OH ↓okay ((returns gaze to paper))
159. G: uhmm::((A returns gaze to G))
160. **>pero eso es mucha historiahhh**
but that is a long story
161. ((A smiles and returns gaze to paper))

In this excerpt, Gloria expanded the context surrounding “no contaban con mi astucia” to include the dialogue that took place before and after El Chapulín Colorado used his iconic

phrase. As in the previous excerpt, her recounting of this dialogue was performative not only in its attention-grabbing gestures and changes in tone, but also as a reflection of her intimate knowledge of the show. Gloria's grammar was also performative in nature, as her use of the imperfect tense highlighted the fact that these lines of dialogue were repeated in every episode as a way of setting up the heroic acts to follow. While not explicitly outlining the social significance of El Chapulín Colorado or the phrase "no contaban con mi astucia," Gloria's expansion of context and positioning of El Chapulín Colorado as a "character" who "has [his] phrases" that "make him famous," just like any other iconic figure or superhero, hinted at her historical knowledge of the symbolic meaning attached to him. In this way Gloria attempted to reframe the significance of the Mexican superhero in a manner that she hoped would illuminate his importance for Alicia, and perhaps trigger some memories of her own.

Yet rather than aligning, even at an interactional level, with Gloria's meaning-making descriptions through the resources she had used in the previous excerpts, such as laughter, Alicia acknowledged Gloria's descriptions with brief smiles, then returned her gaze to the text several times (Figure 2), moving her gaze back to her interlocutor only when Gloria raised the volume of her speech or made a direct gesture towards Alicia. The return of her gaze to the paper showed a returned alignment with the text and task, rather than with Gloria's attempts to engage her in symbolic understanding of the context. Gloria's final utterance in this excerpt, "pero eso es mucha historiahhh" (but that is a long story, line 158) and laughter represented her first acknowledgement during this interaction that she was losing Alicia's attention.



Figure 2. Alicia's gaze breaks during Excerpt 3. Note how Gloria's gaze stays on Alicia throughout.

This close analysis of the interaction surrounding the lexical item “astucia” characterizes the entire exchange about the article. Throughout this exchange, Alicia requested referents for certain words or expressions, which Gloria attempted to provide through lengthy performances of context and description. Alicia repeatedly disengaged from these explanations through gaze breaks, utterances indicating transition readiness, or abbreviated reactive tokens. Her initial symbolic alignment (i.e., co-constructed familiarity with Chespirito’s television programs) was lessened to interactional alignment, then interactional asynchrony as Gloria struggled to convey her own symbolic knowledge. This asynchrony suggested an absence of mutuality, in which Alicia and Gloria appeared to have positioned each other’s roles differently; while Gloria attempted to co-construct a shared history of a popular Mexican television program, Alicia focused on finding referential information to complete the task of presenting an online article. The resulting unevenness also points to the difficulty in taking up and building upon symbolic knowledge in an environment of referential-based language teaching, which I discuss in the following section.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of these data demonstrates how a simple request for a troublesome lexical item revealed uneven engagement with the symbols and histories of an iconic Mexican superhero. Gloria, calling upon her own memories of the show, tailored a detailed description of physical characteristics and context that indexed a deep familiarity with one of Latin America’s most famous comedians. Although Gloria’s explanations offered only a small window into the significance of El Chapulín Colorado and his characteristic phrases, her ability to contextualize what she had previously referred to as a “classic” example of Mexican culture became more and more apparent in the excerpts. This suggests that, although Gloria may not have been able to articulate the overall significance of El Chapulín Colorado as a Latin American anti-hero, she did undertake a symbolic performance at the most elemental level of history and memory. The analysis of her exchange with Alicia highlights the importance of looking at symbolic competence on many levels, from the simple transmission of historical knowledge to the relational, transgressive, and potential interactions that can take shape once prior knowledge has been mediated through a critical lens.

Although Gloria and Alicia initially established alignment through their shared knowledge of Bolaños’s television programs, further meaning-making discussion was met with resistance. Alicia, having obtained the referent for “astucia” that she sought, did not align at a symbolic level, but rather accepted Gloria’s explanations with quick reactive tokens and, eventually, disengaged entirely. Despite Alicia’s prior knowledge of Bolaños’s television programs, she was unable or unwilling to bring this knowledge into the discussion, preferring instead to focus on the referential equivalents for various vocabulary words. The inability on the part of both participants to come to an agreement on the purpose of the session led to several lost opportunities to build upon the topic being discussed. The resulting interaction evidenced a lack of mutuality as well as the difficulty of performing symbolic competence even in a low-anxiety environment, such as that of peer tutoring.

In undertaking this analysis, my intention is not to place the “blame” upon Alicia. Undoubtedly, Alicia’s focus on the task of rendering the article comprehensible played a part in her resistance to Gloria’s symbolic performance. Yet this focus could have been due to many factors, from a lack of clear objectives established prior to the session, to Alicia’s history as a learner, to Gloria’s own symbolic performance. I add the latter possibility

because it was clear that, despite Gloria's obvious familiarity with the program, she was not able to reframe this familiarity in a way that made it meaningful to Alicia.

This inability to establish meaningful interaction parallels previous findings with respect to peer tutoring (e.g., Beasley, 1997; Thonus, 2004; Trimbur, 1987). The presence of a supposedly more "expert" interlocutor, combined with differing expectations and conceptions of the task at hand, frequently restrict opportunities for collaborative dialogue. This underlines the importance of training peer tutors in pedagogical methods that elicit and prolong communication with their designated peer learners (more on this can be found in the following section). Moreover, these findings highlight the pervasiveness of learner perceptions, which are frequently reinforced by their interlocutors, of language as referent. By seeking one-to-one definitions of problem words or phrases, Alicia demonstrated an orientation to this perception, rather than to language as a system of meaning-making potentials and resources. When Gloria attempted to enrich her definition with description and contextual information, Alicia did not align with Gloria's memories, nor did she bring her own symbolic knowledge into the discussion after the initial comment about her grandparents. This asynchrony led to an interaction along the lines of service-seeker and service-supplier, with the deviation from these norms leading to a breakdown in communication.

Therefore, we could say that Alicia's resistance to Gloria's attempts at symbolic performance was in fact opposition to her peer's departure from the service encounter-like nature of the presumed task of tutoring. Alicia's gaze breaks and change of state tokens indicated an "essential indifference" to anything beyond the exchange of referential information (Jefferson & Lee, 1981, p. 413). At the same time, Gloria's insistence on continuing the explanation prolonged the asynchrony and increased her peer's indifference, rather than engaging Alicia in the discussion. Towards the end of the interaction, Alicia had managed to reframe, at least at an interactional level, Gloria's presumed expertise with her silences and gaze breaks, leading to Gloria's uncomfortable laughter and somewhat abashed utterance—"but that is a long story"—at the end of the interaction.

In peer tutoring, like language teaching and learning in general, short-term objectives often make it difficult to probe the varied levels of symbolic knowledge. Too often, opportunities for fostering symbolic competence slip from language instructors' grasp in our need to move on to the next task. How can we encourage language learners and instructors to not only cultivate symbolic competence, but also to seek it out in interaction?

IMPLICATIONS: TOWARDS A PEDAGOGY OF SYMBOLIC COMPETENCE

In this article, I have explored the intersections of interactional expressions of alignment, mutuality, and co-construction by drawing on Kramsch's (2009, 2011) and others' notions of symbolic competence. My objective here is to outline how researchers and practitioners in additional language learning may be able to detect different levels of symbolic competence in interaction and begin to mediate that knowledge with learners in an accessible and meaningful manner. Below I put forth some suggestions for pedagogical applications of the findings offered by this study. I do not claim to generalize the findings from this close discourse analysis of a single case to all language learning contexts; however, the analysis does suggest important ways in which at least one level of symbolic competence could be

fostered and co-constructed.

Jefferson and Lee (1981) discussed the issue of constructing emotional reciprocity, or “learning how to listen” (p. 418). Fernández Dobao (2012), in her recommendations on peer work in the classroom, also indirectly referenced this notion when discussing the importance of paying attention to participant orientation to the activity at hand. By training peer tutors, learners, and instructors to recognize nonverbal cues that indicate attention or a lack thereof, mutuality could be greatly strengthened, with both learners and peer tutors paying close attention not only to the task at hand but also to their interlocutors. In the data of this study, Alicia’s preoccupation with her in-class assignment appeared to have played a role in her resistance to Gloria’s additional explanations, while Gloria’s enthusiasm for the subject matter may have prevented her from tuning in to Alicia’s goals for the discussion. Had both interlocutors been more sensitive to the nonverbal cues present in the interaction, there might have been more agreement on the goals of the session.

The disconnect between Alicia and Gloria also speaks to the need for more articulation between classwork and peer tutoring, an issue I have discussed previously (Back, 2016). As I have mentioned, the peer-tutoring program in Spanish explicitly forbid the discussion of classroom assignments. However, it is clear from the data that this does not necessarily discourage exchanges concerning assignments, nor does it encourage interaction. Rather, language program directors might allow instructors to incorporate more frequent, lower stakes assignments designed for peer-tutoring sessions. This would allow learners and peer tutors to use these sessions as an opportunity to mutually explore symbolic knowledge, while acknowledging the very real connection that exists for learners between classroom assignments and peer-tutoring interactions.

Most importantly, there is a need for a new orientation towards language learning and, specifically for this context, peer-tutor training to encourage teachers to create practices that both highlight symbolic meaning and promote symbolic competence and performance. Peer tutors would benefit greatly from learning how to use their own symbolic competences to scaffold and elicit critical thinking in their learners. In the episode described above, Gloria could have positioned *El Chapulín Colorado* in relation to more well-known superheroes such as Batman or Superman, prompting Alicia to compare them in order to come up with her own ideas about the Mexican character and superheroes in general. Alternatively, Gloria could have probed Alicia’s knowledge of *El Chavo* and scaffolded a comparison of Bolaños’s two most popular television programs. By linking *El Chapulín Colorado* with something in Alicia’s own history, the symbolic knowledge hidden in the phrase “¡no contaban con mi astucia!” may have become more apparent.

An even more ambitious model would be to take Alicia’s article assignment as a point of departure, rather than an assignment in and of itself. A language instructor could design an entire unit around Roberto Gomez Bolaños and his television characters and articulate this with conversations during the peer-tutoring sessions. Cultural artifacts could include clips—specifically those that use the signature phrases mentioned in the article—from *El Chavo* and *El Chapulín Colorado*; selections from Bolaños’s Twitter account, again cross-referencing any famous quotes with television clips; interviews with individuals from Latin American countries (such as the peer tutors) who grew up watching Bolaños’s programs; and student-designed re-enactments or absurd dialogues based on scenes from *El Chavo* and *El Chapulín Colorado*. The instructor could also introduce intercultural, comparative elements by contrasting *El Chapulín Colorado* with other, more universally known superheroes, allowing students to reflect on the significance of heroes and anti-heroes in today’s world. The design

of this type of unit would allow students to more fully explore the rich symbolic and historical intersections of Mexican popular culture, parody, mid-70s television in Latin America, and a wide array of other topics, facilitating the move from learner perceptions of language as a referent towards language as a meaning-making system and cultural practice (Kramsch, 2006, 2009).

Finally, I would re-emphasize the importance of explicit education for all educators in methods for recognizing, building upon, and further fostering symbolic competence. Teacher education in symbolic competence is an ample topic for future research and pedagogical development; while most previous literature has proposed activities for learners, I argue that the cultivation of symbolic competence must start with in-depth language educator preparation. Some elements of this preparation could include extensive opportunities to reflect upon educators' own histories and symbolic knowledge, and how these relate to the target language, as well as the languages and identities of their students. World language methods courses for teachers and tutors could also enhance lessons on how to teach culture and context by "practicing what we preach" through the incorporation of authentic texts, such as literature, film clips, and excerpts from social media. By engaging in a closer examination of these and other resources, future world language teachers would gain a greater understanding of how to more fully negotiate their symbolic value.

CONCLUSION

Recent research, theoretical, and pedagogical frameworks are encouraging world language educators to move beyond viewing language as a simple vehicle for communication and to understand it as a complex system, rich with historical and symbolic knowledge. However, the daily demands of the world language classroom, as well as the continued perception of language as referent, can discourage language instructors from cultivating learners' appreciation of language and symbolic competence. In this article, I have shown how a peer-tutoring encounter can be a setting for exploring and fostering symbolic competence. While the hurdles of mutuality and equality must be addressed in learner-tutor interactions such as this, providing low anxiety, highly interactive peer-tutoring sessions that are closely articulated to symbolically rich classroom curricula and practices would allow learners to make more meaningful connections to the target language and culture. At the same time, peer tutoring could play a key role in efforts to expand upon communicative language teaching in a way that resonates more powerfully with learners, teachers, and tutors.

APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

Retrieved and adapted from

<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/schegloff/TranscriptionProject/>

bold text	Spanish
plain text	English
()	inaudible utterance
(bueno)	transcriber's best estimation of nearly inaudible utterance
[onset of overlap of utterances
]	end of overlap of utterances
=	utterances that have no discernable silence between them

(0.5)	silence represented in tenths of a second
(.)	“micropause,” ordinarily less than 2/10 of a second
.	falling/final intonation
?	rising intonation
,	continuing intonation
:	prolongation or stretching of sound
-	cut-off or self-interruption
bueno, BUeno, BUEno	increased loudness
◦	markedly quiet or soft talk
↑↓	sharp rise (up) or fall (down) in pitch
((cough))	transcriber’s description of events
hhHHHh	aspiration or laughter

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