

Agreeing, Accounting, and Affiliating: L2 Interactional Competence in High-Scoring L2 English Learners' Agreement Sequences

Erica Sandlund (Karlstad University)

Pia Sundqvist (University of Oslo)

Abstract

Research on what should count as evidence of foreign/second language interactional competence (L2 IC) has grown exponentially, particularly drawing on work in Conversation Analysis (CA) (Hall, Hellerman, and Pekarek Doehler 2011). Recurrent participation in L2 conversation is viewed as key to IC development, and learners gradually master an increasing range of L2-appropriate social actions (Salaberry and Kunitz 2019). We address L2 IC in two educational contexts—Norway and Flanders—where learners' exposure to English is high but where the starting age of formal instruction differs. We focus on one facet of L2 IC: the interactional management of *agreement sequences*. Previous research has focused on speakers' practices for doing *disagreement* (e.g., Čekaitė 2007), showing that learners deploy more advanced methods for disagreement as their proficiency and L2 participation increases. In this study, which is based on generated speaking test data using pre-set test topics that learners are to discuss, relatively few disagreements were found. However, for high-scoring learners, extended and collaborative agreement sequences revealed various practices for jointly agreeing on a stance on the pre-set topics. From a collection of 24 speaking tests collected in grade 10, a subsample of the four highest-scoring learners in each context ($N = 8$) and their co-participants was analyzed further with a CA approach. Findings show the learners' awareness of a preference for agreeing with first assessments (cf. Pomerantz 1984; Sacks 1987), and of the conditional relevance of accounts following expressions of agreement with a test prompt. Participants also show affiliation with each other's contributions, and for the most part align with prior action in their responses (cf. Steensig 2019). Participants also display competence in drawing on vocal, verbal, and embodied resources in displaying agreement and affiliation.

Sandlund, Erica, and Pia Sundqvist. 2026. 'Agreeing, Accounting and Affiliating: L2 Interactional Competence in High-Scoring L2 English Learners' Agreement Sequences.' *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 25(1): 9–47. <https://doi.org/10.35360/njes.v25i1.63737>. Copyright (c) 2026 Erica Sandlund, Pia Sundqvist. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

Keywords: accounts; agreement; assessment; conversation analysis; extramural English; interactional competence

Introduction

In a rapidly changing world, it is natural that both current and future needs of language learners also shift. Along with reading and writing, oracy is considered a core skill in Swedish compulsory education across the mandatory school subjects. Some researchers have even argued that learners' speaking competency is 'one of the strongest predictors of their future life chances' (Kaldahl, Bachinger, and Rijlaarsdam 2019: 30). Given that oral and interactional skills in a foreign/second language (L2) can open doors to subject learning, the building of social relationships, and future professional opportunities, it is central that research continues to address speaking and interactional skills in L2 education. The present study addresses one facet of L2 learners' oral proficiency and interaction: the management of collaborative agreement in task-based interaction.

While the concept of foreign/second language interactional competence (L2 IC) has been known since the 1980s (e.g., Salaberry and Kunitz 2019a; Young 1999), empirical research on what counts as evidence of L2 IC has grown exponentially in recent years, particularly drawing on work in Conversation Analysis (CA) (Hall et al. 2011; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). A key tenet is that recurrent participation in L2 conversation is central to the development of L2 IC, in which learners gradually acquire the ability to accomplish an increasing range of L2-appropriate social actions (Salaberry and Kunitz 2019a). In this paper, drawing on L2 English speaking test data from Norway and Flanders, we focus on one facet of L2 IC: the interactional and joint management of *agreement*. Norway and Flanders are similar in that both offer many opportunities for informal learning of English outside school, but differ in terms of the starting age of English instruction in school (grade 1 Norway; grade 7 or 8 Flanders; see, e.g., Busby 2024; Puimège and Peters 2019).

While *disagreement* has been explored in relation to L2 IC (e.g., Čekaitė 2007; Hüttner 2014; Pekarek Doehler and Pochon-Berger 2011), agreement and L2 IC has been investigated to a much lesser extent. However, it is safe to assume that the development of IC and proficiency go hand in hand also for agreement practices. In contrast to everyday conversations, institutional interactions, such as speaking tests or conversations elicited for research purposes, may possibly present less of

an impetus for working through potential disagreements, as the stakes for participation and the social relations are different. In a comparison between L2 oral proficiency interviews and ordinary conversation, Seedhouse (2013) argues that testing conversations such as oral proficiency interview tests have ‘no requirement to achieve intersubjectivity’, that is, shared understanding based on negotiation of the meaning of turns and actions (Seedhouse 2013: 211). This frame may have bearing on the ways agreement and disagreement feature in such interactions, depending not only on the purpose of the interaction, but also on matters like the degree of familiarity with co-participants, and the tasks for speaking presented. In this paper, we draw on data from elicited L2 speaking tests to examine how eight high-performing learners (aged 15–16) and their co-participants in Norway and Flanders manage agreement sequences in L2 English conversations guided by discussion prompts. Drawing on Conversation Analysis, we examine how the management of agreement sequences in task-based interaction provides opportunities for displaying L2 IC, and discuss what learners are able to accomplish interactionally by affiliating, accounting, and elaborating on prior speakers’ talk in displaying agreeing stances. The study also discusses how the speaking tasks (in this case, a test developed in Sweden as the National test of English for the same age group) offer opportunities for building alliances against test statements and for displaying affiliation with co-participants’ stances. Findings contribute to our understanding of aspects of L2 IC.

Grounded in conversation analytic observations on agreement and disagreement in interaction, we first situate the study in relation to work on L2 IC. We then illustrate two key sequential environments in which the L2 learners in our data manage agreement: 1) in relation to the task-at-hand, and 2) in response to first assessments. We then take readers through an extended sequence where different ‘methods’ for doing agreement are displayed by participants. Finally, we discuss the empirical observations in light of L2 IC and the context of L2 assessment.

Aims and research questions

In the present, explorative study, we examine agreement practices as displays of L2 IC in two high-input contexts when it comes to opportunities for informal learning of English. The aim of the study is to gain understanding as to the different practices for accomplishing

agreement displayed by L2 learners in a small-group oral assessment context. Two research questions have guided the analysis:

- 1) How do high-scoring L2 learners of English at the end of lower secondary school (grade 10) display interactional competence in speaking test conversations, specifically through their accomplishment of agreement sequences?
- 2) In what ways are the agreement practices observed afforded or constrained by the test format?

Research questions 1 and 2 are answered through a detailed analysis of agreement sequences in the dataset and in relation to the test materials (see Swedish National Agency for Education 2014). While the two contexts make for an interesting comparison given the differences in starting age of formal instruction, our sample is small, and any conclusions about systematic differences between the two national contexts would be unfair. Instead, we focus on the competencies of all learners in our sample in order to shed light upon the role of agreement management for the display of L2 IC. We thus make no claims as to the representativeness of the particular learners for their national context and age, nor about the relationship between start of formal instruction and L2 IC, as that would also require a consideration of, for example, differences in the teaching of spoken English in Norway and Flanders.

Literature review

While L2 interactional skills have been examined from different perspectives, we focus here on contributions from Conversation Analysis, and in particular, work focusing on agreement and disagreement practices. We also review key concepts related to the accomplishment of agreement in interaction, such as alignment and affiliation.

L2 interactional competence: Conversation analytic insights

An increasing awareness of the centrality of IC in an L2 is visible in L2 research since the 1980s, with the publication of Kramsch's (1986) paper, which argued for a move from the then-dominating proficiency movement and toward a focus on learners' interactional skills. While definitions of IC have varied and changed over time (see, e.g., Hall 1995; Young 1999), conversation analytic (CA) work on L2 IC tends to worry less about the

place of IC in relation to related concepts and theories. Instead, work on L2 IC encompasses a variety of foci under the general empirical umbrella of the study of L2 learners' 'competence to participate in interaction' (Kasper and Ross 2013: 9). Pekarek Doehler (2018: 5) emphasizes that the CA approach to IC is to be understood 'in terms of members' practices or "methods" (i.e., systematic procedures) for organizing social interaction, relating to issues such as turn-taking, disagreeing, repairing, or closing a conversation'. Given that CA assumes that all interaction is jointly accomplished by participants, actions by a L2 speaker are not individual, but collaboratively accomplished and 'tailored to the particular situation at hand and to the particular others participating' in them (Pekarek Doehler 2018: 5). As learners progress in their L2 development, they are able to competently deploy an increasing range of linguistic and interactional resources for accomplishing specific social actions, such as responding to a compliment or delivering an invitation, tailored to a particular context. Current work on L2 IC covers a broad range of interactional practices in different L2s, and in everyday as well as teaching and assessment contexts (see, e.g., Hall et al. 2011; Ross and Kasper 2013; Salaberry and Kunitz 2019b; Sundqvist and Sandlund 2024; Young and He 1998). In this paper, we align ourselves with the growing body of research on L2 IC development, with our specific focus on agreement practices.

Agreement, disagreement, and L2 interactional competence

Agreeing and disagreeing are commonplace actions in everyday and institutional interactions. Given the range of possible practices that can be related to agreement and disagreement, it is not surprising that what constitutes *competent L2 agreement* would be problematic to specify. However, a number of studies have tied disagreement to the development of L2 IC. Research has shown that learners gradually master more advanced methods for accomplishing disagreement as their proficiency and participation in L2 interaction increases (e.g., Čekaitė 2007; Pekarek Doehler and Pochon-Berger 2011). For example, Pekarek Doehler and Pochon-Berger (2011) observed that more advanced learners of French systematically differed from lower intermediate learners in that they displayed more varied interactional formats for displaying disagreement, such as 'yes but' formats, more elaborations and explanations for their disagreement, and were able to disagree both in the immediate proximity of the source of disagreement, and distanced from it. Hüttner (2014)

examined assessed interactions of German learners of English across different testing formats, and found that the examination format constrained the types of disagreement that learners could display. This finding has bearing on studies building on any type of elicited speaking data, such as the test prompts used in the present study.

While disagreement has been explored in IC studies, agreement practices have been less so. However, agreement practices also have to be produced in a recognizable, contextually appropriate, and sequentially fitted manner, even though the interactional delicacy of disagreeing openly may present additional challenges. We now turn to some structural aspects of agreement in interaction, which is built on the interactional organization of L1 conversation.

Agreement actions are essentially second-position actions in that they respond to something in a prior turn, such as a positive or negative assessment. An early description of agreement practices is Pomerantz' (1984) groundbreaking work on preference organization, specifically exemplified through the organization of assessments and their agreeing or disagreeing reception by co-participants (see also Sacks 1987). Pomerantz was able to show how there is an underlying interactional preference for agreeing with a first assessment, and, consequently, a dispreference for disagreeing with assessments. Focusing on the production of second assessments (i.e., assessments produced in response to a first assessment), Pomerantz (1984: 66) demonstrated how agreement with a prior assessment can be accomplished through, for example, an up- or downgraded assessment. This second assessment can show strong or weak agreement with a prior assessment, such as in the following example where the second assessment constitutes an upgrade of the first:

B: She seems like a nice little [lady

A: [Awfully nice little person

An upgrade, then, would be a second assessment which is stronger (positive or negative) than the first assessment. In the example above, the supplying of 'awfully' adds not only agreement to the first turn, but upgrades the assessment of a third party.

Agreement is generally produced without delays and mitigations in a *preferred* delivery format. Disagreements, on the other hand, are treated as dispreferred actions, which is shown in that they are frequently

delivered in ways which also suggest their interactionally delicate nature. By way of example, disagreement with a first assessment can be produced through initial agreement before the disagreeing turn units are delivered, as in the following example from Pomerantz (1984: 73):

- R: Butchu admit he is having fun and you think
it's funny
K: I think it's funny, yeah. But it's a
ridiculous funny.

Above, R is inviting agreement from K, and while K initially produces an agreeing second assessment ('funny'), the assessment is subsequently modified to 'a ridiculous funny' preceded by the disagreement marker 'But'. Other ways in which the dispreference for disagreement can be observed is through delays, such as initial silences, hesitation markers, or clarification requests (Pomerantz 1984: 75). For the present study, empirical work on assessments emanating from Pomerantz' work is relevant in the sense that the type of 'opinion discourse' invited by the prompts in the test materials used (cf. Sundqvist and Sandlund 2024) makes second assessments relevant, as participants take turns producing talk on pre-set topics, which frequently means agreeing or disagreeing with a prior speaker's initial assessment.

While agreement and disagreement are colloquially understood as having to do with moments in social interaction where participants voice their support or difference of opinion to something a co-interactant produces, CA work also discusses two related concepts: *alignment* and *affiliation*, which can form part of agreeing and disagreeing actions, and which have their corresponding non-agreeing descriptors (*disalignment* and *disaffiliation*). While we do not have space for an extended review here, a general distinction is that alignment is structural whereas affiliation lies more on the social/affective level (Steensig 2019; Stivers 2008; Stivers, Mondada, and Steensig 2011). As Steensig (2019: 249) notes, any contribution to ongoing talk 'is part of some activity and has a format that next speakers need to deal with'. To align with an immediate prior action has to do with things like accepting and adhering to an assigned interactional role (such as 'story recipient', see Stivers 2008), collaborating with the ongoing interactional activity, and producing a next action matching the format preference of the prior action (such as

accepting or declining an invitation that has been issued). Alignment, thus, is central to the architecture of social interaction, and does not in itself constitute a practice of agreement, but can be a part of agreeing actions. Affiliation, on the other hand, lies on the social and affective level of interaction and has to do with actions that display empathy, support the stance expressed by a co-participant, or which match the action preference for a particular prior action (Steensig 2019: 249). Affiliation, then, is only relevant when a prior action has expressed a particular stance or action preference. Just as with alignment, affiliation can be relevant to agreement when a co-participant has expressed a stance, which a recipient then can affiliate with (show support for). However, an interactant can affiliate with the stance in a previous speaker's turn without displaying agreement. Also, a recipient can align, structurally, with the interactional project-in-progress, but show disaffiliation with some aspect of prior talk or stance.

Aligning and affiliating are both ways of cooperating in conversation (Stivers, Mondada and Steensig 2011: 20). In the present study, we are interested in the linguistic and interactional practices L2 learners deploy in agreement sequences. In collaboratively accomplishing agreement sequences, participants must cooperate both with the project-at-hand, and also affiliate or disaffiliate with any stance taken by a prior speaker. As we draw on a dataset where the test materials also explicitly invite agreement or disagreement with pre-set topics, our dataset is a rich site for examining how participants manage agreement/disagreement through showing each other their own stance, which co-participants may agree, affiliate, disagree or disaffiliate with. To our knowledge, few studies have to date focused on the relationship between L2 IC and agreement practices (but see Dings, 2014, and Tecedor 2016, on the development of interactional resources related to alignment; and Zhang 2016, on agreement negotiation among learners of Mandarin). Given that agreement sequences are different from disagreements, but equally important in terms of competencies L2 learners need to master, we believe they warrant further investigation. This is also relevant for assessment contexts, as learners may be unwilling to display disagreement in high-stakes testing situations. As such, our study can inform also raters' and teachers' views on the assessment of L2 IC by shedding light on competencies displayed through doing agreement.

Data and methods

Participants and settings

Data was collected within the STAGE project (Sundqvist, Peters, Skar, and Gyllstad 2025), which addresses the relationship between *English proficiency* on the one hand, and the onset of *formal instruction of English in school* and input from learners' self-initiated use of English outside the classroom, so-called *extramural English* (e.g., Sundqvist 2024), on the other. Data was collected from learners in grades 1, 6, and 10 in two settings: Norway, which has an early start of formal instruction (grade 1), and Flanders (the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), which has a late start of formal instruction (grade 7 or 8). Learners in both settings are exposed to a great deal of extramural English from an early age, as both Norway and Flanders are input-rich regions. For the present study, we draw on a corpus of 24 small-group speaking tests collected from 69 STAGE participants in grade 10 (aged 15–16), using the Swedish National English Speaking Test for grade 9, (NEST9) (NAFS Project, n.d.; Swedish National Agency for Education 2014), as test instrument. The reason for using the Swedish NEST is that it is a well-established test, carefully piloted, and designed for the same age group as in our dataset, but the test format as such is new to all participants and should therefore not advantage or disadvantage either context. The NEST construct is oral proficiency and interaction, and the test materials include a rating scale which covers proficiency as well as certain interactional skills (Sundqvist and Sandlund 2024). In this way, the NEST9 was deemed suitable for eliciting speaking data in an interactionally focused setting. Table 1 provides an overview of the whole sample in grade 10.

A total of 24 speaking tests were collected, 13 in Norway and 11 in Flanders, which means there were more participants from Norway ($n = 39$) than from Flanders ($n = 30$). Table 1 also shows that most tests had three 10th graders grouped together. The exceptions were classes 5 and 9 in Flanders, where participants were paired in three tests, which had to do with the number of consenting students in each class.

Table 1: Overview of Grade 10 sample

Setting	School id	Class	Participants (N)	NEST9 (N)
Norway	S03	1	3	1
	S06	2	6	2
	S07	3	6	2
	S11	4	3	1
	S11	5	3	1
	S11	6	6	2
	S13	7	12	4
Total			39	13
Flanders	S50	1	3	1
	S50	2	3	1
	S50	3	3	1
	S51	4	6	2
	S52	5	2	1
	S52	6	3	1
	S52	7	3	1
	S52	8	3	1
	S63	9	4	2
Total			30	11
Total			69	24

Test administration and assessment

The test construct of the NEST9 is *oral production and interaction* (for test details, see Byman Frisé, Sundqvist, and Sandlund 2021; Sundqvist and Sandlund 2024). The NEST9 is created at the University of Gothenburg on behalf of the Swedish National Agency for Education (NAFS Project, n.d.). The NEST9 is administered in Sweden every year as part of the National Test of English, where the speaking test is one of three parts. In this study, the NEST9 ‘Who cares?’ from 2013/2014 was used. It has a three-part structure with a warm-up (usually monologic speech describing pictures) followed by two rounds of peer conversation using color-coded topic cards. The blue cards have questions (e.g., ‘You see a dog locked up in a car on a hot day. How would you react? What could you do? What should other people do? Discuss with your friend!’). The yellow cards instead feature statements (e.g., ‘People care too much about sports. Agree? Disagree? Explain why and give examples. Discuss

with your friend!’). In Sweden, the class teacher typically acts as both the test administrator and examiner (see Sundqvist, Wikström, Sandlund, and Nyroos 2018), but here, a researcher or research assistant administered the test to students in groups of three that had been suggested by their teacher. Test-takers were instructed to stick to English throughout, and the researcher remained in the background in accordance with NEST9 instructions. All tests were video-recorded and lasted 15–25 minutes. The recordings were later assessed by four external raters.

Four experienced English teachers from Sweden were recruited as raters. Using teachers as raters for research purposes is relatively common (see Borger 2019; Sundqvist and Sandlund 2024) and has the advantage that they are already familiar with the assessment rubric. The raters recruited were experienced, and three had assessed the NEST9 more than 11 times and one between 6 and 10 times. The dataset was distributed across the four raters so that each student was assessed independently by three raters, who awarded a holistic score from A to F, equivalent to a 9-point scale (see Figure 1). The raters were provided with the video recordings and instructed to follow normal scoring procedures, using the NEST9 assessment factors *Content* and *Language and Expression* with criteria that they were all familiar with (for details, see chapter 1, Sundqvist and Sandlund 2024).

F	E	D	C	B	A
⋮	⋮		⋮		

F	E	D	C	B	A
1 ⋮ 2	3 ⋮ 4	5	6 ⋮ 7	8	9

Figure 1: Assessment of NEST9: Raters ticked one box (row 1) on a 9-point scale

All assessment data were collected digitally using the tool Nettskjema (University of Oslo, n.d.). The mean of the three scores, while scored holistically, was deemed suitable for obtaining proficiency levels among

participants (in the project as a whole, the NEST9 scores are also statistically correlated with other measures, such as extramural English habits reported in a questionnaire, see Sundqvist et al., 2025).

Data selection

A subcorpus of recordings consisting of the highest scoring learners in the dataset forms the basis for the present study, yielding a total of seven recordings. Given that we are interested in the IC of learners who have benefitted from both formal and informal learning (cf. De Wilde, Brysbaert, and Eyckmans 2020; De Wilde, Brysbaert, and Eyckmans 2021; Sundqvist 2009), we focus on a comparable threshold point in their schooling—the final year of lower secondary school. At this point, both learner groups have been exposed to formal education (Norway 10 years; Flanders 3 or 4 years). Thus, a qualitative analysis of interactional skills is more likely to reveal subtle, more advanced practices of agreeing than at lower grade levels in school.

Additionally, the selection of recordings was guided by a focus on high-performance learners. The argument for selecting tests including the highest-scoring learners in each setting was guided by an interest in possible differences in interactional competence when using a qualitative analytic approach, since there are generally fewer *scoring* differences for learners at both ends of the performance continuum (cf. Millet 2016). Since each learner has been assessed by three raters, who all assigned very similar scores to the selected eight learners, we can be fairly certain that the focal learners were the strongest in terms of speaking and interaction. While the four top scores from the Norwegian dataset had been awarded higher grades (from 8.7 to a perfect 9.0) as compared to the highest-scoring Flemish students (from 7.0 to 7.7), the eight students represent the top performers in the dataset, and thus allow for an analysis of what they can accomplish in terms of particular actions-in-interaction at this threshold level. As observed in previous research (Millet 2016; Sandlund and Sundqvist 2019), high performers are more likely to receive similar scores from different raters than, for example, learners in the mid- or low level ranges of performance. While the score assigned to each learner is based on both language proficiency and interactional skills, it forms a reasonable starting point for uncovering what their interactional practices actually look like. Naturally, co-participants' actions and proficiencies also play a key role. The inherent co-constructedness of interaction

commits the analyst to describing and understanding the interaction in its entirety, which means that co-participants' actions are equally important. As such, a fully individual analysis of the focal learners is neither possible, nor desirable with a CA approach. However, we pay particular attention to the focal learners' actions as initiators and recipients, and to their particular contributions to the trajectory of an agreement sequence.

From the full NEST9 dataset (see Table 1), the four highest-scoring learners from each setting were sampled. Two of the Flemish high-performers took the test together, which gave a total of seven recordings (see Table 2).

Table 2: High-scoring focal students in the sample and co-participants

Setting	Test ID (min:sec)	Focal student ID	NEST9 score	Pseudonym focal student	Pseudonyms co- participants
Norway	NEST9NO _01 (18:02)	S03C10F L02	9.0	Bella	Kate, Karine
	NEST9NO _03 (23:54)	S06C10 BL12	9.0	Erat	Tilde, Veronica
	NEST9NO _04 (17:43)	S07C10 AL07	8.7	Sander	Marius, Emma
	NEST9NO _05 (19:59)	S07C10 BL03	8.7	Kristian	Anders, Tim
	NEST9FL _01 (16:55)	S50C4A L13	7.3	Sam	Stefaan, Axel
Flanders	NEST9FL _01 (16:55)	S50C4A L16	7.7	Stefaan	Sam, Axel
	NEST9FL _05 (22:13)	S51C4D OL12	7.0	Leyth	Rita, Lia

As shown in Table 2, the Norwegian focal learners reached higher mean scores than the Flemish students. However, in a small dataset, the difference visible in the table may not represent statistical significance. Given that this study focuses on interactional practices, we have not taken

any grade differences into account in our discussion of findings; scores were only used to generate the subcorpus.

Following a statement regarding research ethics below, the analytic process is described, after first introducing the conversation analytic approach to L2 IC.

Ethical considerations

The STAGE project has been ethically assessed by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, Sikt (application number: 900288). For the data collection, participants filled out a written consent form during the recruitment process, and they were informed that their participation did not, in any way, impact on their grade in English and that their teacher would not have access to the recorded data. All participants were aged 15 years or older at the time of data collection and thus, according to ethical guidelines, able to provide their own consent. Caregivers were, however, provided with an information letter, including contact information to the researchers. At the time of recording, participants were asked for their consent to participating a second time. A research assistant gave learners instructions and remained in the background, and intervened only to let the learners know when they could proceed to the next part of the test.

In presenting excerpts, all learners' names are pseudonymized (see Table 2), as are names of places of schools or other identifying information. In our review of the dataset, we did not encounter any sensitive information disclosed by participants, and thus, this was not a concern when selecting excerpts for presentation.

Analytic approach

Methodological approach

Methodologically, the study draws on Conversation Analysis and related work on L2 IC (Hall and Pekarek Doehler 2011; Sacks et al. 1974; Salaberry and Kunitz 2019b). The CA approach to L2 IC follows the principles of any CA study, which centers on uncovering the systematics of interaction and the ways in which interactants achieve mutual understanding through talk and embodied action, and to describe 'the competencies that speakers use and rely on in social interaction' (Nguyen 2012: 10; see also Drew 2005). As such, the actions L2 speakers attempt,

fail, or successfully accomplish in a way that is recognizable to co-participants is in focus for the analysis.

By now, CA is an established approach to the study of social interaction in language learning and teaching (Kasper and Wagner 2011). CA, which developed out of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) has since the 1960s represented an approach to the systematic, empirical study of the interactional organization of social action in situated talk. CA assumes that all interaction is structured, that all contributions are meaningful to participants, and that in designing a responsive action, participants display their understanding of immediately prior turns and actions (Schegloff 2007). CA draws on recorded data, and by now, video data has become the gold standard, as the analysis strives to have access to the same interactional (visual and vocal) resources as participants in the interactions under study.

CA analysis centers on the detailed description of the sequential and temporal organization of social activities (Schegloff 2007), and applied CA draws on empirical work on everyday conversation, taking into account the constraints of particular institutional settings on talk and interaction (Heritage and Drew 1992; Nguyen 2012). In this study, the institutional context is language education, and the particular interactional activity is interaction in small-group L2 speaking tests (cf. Sundqvist and Sandlund 2024). The data collection setting mirrors how speaking tests are conducted in language education (see Sundqvist and Sandlund 2024), but the particular dataset examined was collected for research purposes; thus, the tests were not high-stakes *in the same sense*. However, the analysis takes into account how participants orient to the particulars of this speaking test activity, as well as to norms and practices of everyday conversation, which entails a recognition that testing talk deviates in specific ways from ordinary conversation. Analytically, the CA approach centers on describing the various resources (linguistic, vocal, sequential, and embodied), methods (for accomplishing social action, reasoning, and shared understanding), and practices (particular ways of packaging particular social actions) that participants mobilize, and make publicly visible. The data presented here follows CA conventions for representing talk and embodied conduct, and draws mainly on the notation system developed by Jefferson (2004, see the Appendix), which was deemed suitable for a dataset where participants remain seated and relatively still. However, since embodied actions such as nodding and smiling can be key

to showing affiliation and/or agreement, we have taken extra care to include them in the transcripts (cf. Stivers 2008).

Analytic steps

The analytic process was conducted in phases. First, the selected seven recordings were viewed repeatedly, and all sequences containing agreement practices were marked, ranging from minimal agreement/disagreement (*yeah, yes but, mm*, etc.) to extended sequences including accounts and elaborations. Sequences with minimal agreement tokens which turned out to serve mainly as continuers or displays of uptake were not included in the subsequent analysis. Some of the sequences identified contained both agreement and disagreement, and these were kept for further analysis. Secondly, the sequences were further examined through detailed transcription and analysis, and the focal learners were marked as either initiators or respondents in the identified sequences. However, we wish to emphasize that in analyzing the agreement sequences, our focus has been on the trajectory of the interaction as it unfolds, rather than on the focal learners per se. The identification of the highest performing learners was a starting point for the data selection, but did not direct the moment-by-moment analysis of each sequence. In this second phase of the analytic work, we also sought to identify the most common agreement sequence types in this particular dataset and type of institutional interaction, in order to take the task prompts into account also. This led to the identification of one common type of agreement—where participants express their agreement with the stance expressed in the written task prompt. While this type is prompted by the specific task formulation, it can be seen as comparable to practices deployed outside of the testing contexts, such as when interactants are confronted with, say, views expressed on social media, and bring those statements into the local, situated interaction. Such contexts require participants to not only display their agreement, but also account for their agreement, which offers a window into the range of practices a L2 speaker can draw on. The second step identified another relevant context for displaying competence to express and manage agreement, namely, agreeing with a prior speaker's assessment. While the organization of first and second assessments has been well-documented (Pomerantz 1984), we examine responses to first assessments in the context of L2 learners who deploy such practices in the pursuit of task accomplishment, and in an institutional context. As such,

the learners' competence in responding to assessments also offers insights into their relative L2 IC.

In selecting sequences for presentation in this paper, we focused on representing the dataset as a whole in a first step. Fragments reflect the range of practices identified in the data described above, but for the sake of presentational space, we first show four instances where agreement is initially only directed at the test prompt (a statement on a topic card). Secondly, three sequences where a first assessment is responded to with agreement are presented. Finally, we delve into an extended sequence with several instances of joint agreement and affiliation. All extracts we selected represent yellow topic cards, which is generally the part of the test with a higher degree of interaction (cf. Sundqvist and Sandlund 2024).

Analysis

In this section, we present the most frequently observed types of agreement sequences in the data: 1) task-invited agreement, and 2) agreement with first assessments. Subsequently, we analyze an extended sequence in detail. For each data excerpt, we identify who is the focal, high-scoring learner, but we analyze the sequences as a joint accomplishment by all three participants (see above on subcorpus creation rationale). Through the excerpts presented, we wish to argue that agreement sequences are therefore just as suitable as disagreement sequences for studying (and assessing) L2 IC.

As mentioned earlier, we have chosen to discard instances of minimal agreement; that is, instances where a *yeah* or *mm* could serve as agreement, but since there are no subsequent elaborations, they mainly seem to serve as devices for displaying uptake. Instead, we have opted for first presenting two common sequential environments for agreement in the data, namely those that are either prompted or constrained by the task-at-hand ('Task-invited agreement—Immediate agreement with task prompt') and those that involve assessments and their responses ('Agreement with first assessments'; cf. Pomerantz 1984) for our focal learners. While all seven recordings featured the first type, not all tests had the second. We could therefore conclude, in line with Hüttner (2014), that the test format and the task types have direct bearing on the types of agreement that learners can appropriately display.

In our final part of the analytic section, we examine an agreement sequence featuring one of the two highest-scoring learners in the dataset,

Erat, and his two co-interactants Tilde and Veronica (Norway dataset). This recording stands out in a number of ways, as it comes across almost as a non-institutional conversation between friends—even though participants go through the test prompts and stick to the tasks. In the sequence, we argue that arriving at joint agreement is a complex process, which requires drawing on vocal, linguistic, embodied, and interactional resources for displaying understanding, shared knowledge, affiliation.

Task-invited agreement: Immediate agreement with task prompt

As described above, the NEST9 test tasks are designed in three parts. In analyzing the data, most of the agreement sequences occurred when the yellow topic cards were used (i.e., the third and final part of the test where students discuss statements). In light of the growing interest in task-based interactions (e.g., Hellermann and Pekarek Doehler 2010; Kunitz, Berggren, Haglind, and Löfquist 2022; Nanbu and Greer 2023), we will begin by showing examples of how the design of the particular discussion tasks encourage particular kinds of agreement sequences.

Excerpts (1)–(4) begin with one of the three learners picking up and reading the topic card statement. In Excerpt (1) below, from the Norwegian sample, Sander (focal learner, score 8.7) is picking up a new card and reads it aloud in line 4, to co-participants Emma and Marius:

Excerpt (1)

NEST9_S07C10A [NO]

1 SAN ((pulls card from pile))
 2 ↑.u::::ahm↓
 3 (1.9)
 4 +people care too little about traffic laws.f+
 + starts reading +stops
 5 MAR → I agree.
 6 SAN → fhhuh hhuh I agreef too cuz it's like
 7 EMM → ↑yeah.
 8 SAN u:h=
 9 EMM → =why not.
 10 (.)
 11 SAN I: LOve like seeing on (.) ((inaudible))
 12 (.) I love like watching (0.4)
 13 +dumb drivers
 + hand gestures, imitating wheel/ holding
 14 MAR yeah it's fun to watch.

Almost immediately, co-participant Marius expresses his stance to the topic ('People care too little about traffic laws') by using the standard formulation *I agree*, and as the topic card has the statement plus the instruction 'Agree? Disagree + Explain why and give examples', his first reaction is clearly task-oriented. Marius, however, does not immediately proceed with an account for his agreeing stance; instead, Sander laughs in response, and produces a reciprocal stance with a smile voice: *I agree too cuz it's like*. His projected account to follow is halted, and Emma produces a minimal agreement token (*yeah*) followed by the somewhat disengaged, or at least ambiguous *why not*. In line 8, Sander seems to reinitiate an account for his agreement with the statement, which is further elaborated with a telling about his enjoyment of, presumably, a show about 'dumb drivers' (lines 11–13), seemingly related to the argument about the relevance of traffic laws, to which Marius offers a second agreeing assessment (*yeah it's fun to watch*).

Excerpt (1) exhibits features of an institutional, task-based interaction, where the task prompt is clearly visible in learners' interaction. Structurally, the format of agreement is 1) an agreeing or disagreeing expression of stance (Du Bois and Kärkkäinen 2012) on the topic card

statement, and 2) an agreeing response by a co-participant, and 3) the initiation of an account for the stance taken. As Excerpt (1) shows, the participants are able to express agreement in a sequentially fitted manner. Sander also manages to initiate and pursue the expected account for his stance despite intervening agreement tokens from Emma, which is launched as a telling about a related phenomenon, which, in turn, is treated as shared knowledge by Marius. However, participants draw heavily on the task instructions in producing the beginning of the agreement sequence. In Excerpt (2) below, we can see an even less elaborated expression of agreement, but which follows the same sequence organization as Excerpt (1).

In our next example, Nena (focal learner, Flanders, score 7.3) and co-participants Lenie and Margot, come upon a card which reads ‘People care too much about equal rights of men and women’, followed by the same instructions for agreeing, disagreeing and explaining why like all the yellow topic cards. Nena reads the card (lines 15–16) and even before she has finished reading, Margot nods emphatically. Nena, without a gap between the reading and her expression of stance, produces the standard formulation *I agree*, but through a smile voice, and with an emphasis on the vowels at the end (line 20). In response, both co-participants display their agreement with both Nena’s agreement and the card statement, using affirmative response tokens:

Excerpt (2)

NEST9_S52C4MW2 [FL]

```

15  NEN    .hh +people care too much about fequal rights
           +starts reading
16          for men and +women.£+
17          +stops reading
18  MAR          +nodding
19          (0.2)
20  NEN → I fagree::£.
21  MAR → °yes::°
22  LEN → hMMM.
23  NEN    .h I think it’s still a problem u:hm the::
24          rights of men and women ((account continues))

```

In line 23, Nena, just like Sander in Excerpt (1), initiates an account for her stance-taking in terms of gender equality, which later generates additional agreement and accounts from co-participants. Participants display to each other, even though minimally, that they share a stance on the topic (i.e., they agree with Nena's initial assessment in the form of an emphatically produced *I agree*), and we also see that Nena treats an account as conditionally relevant to the task-at-hand in line 24 as the topical sequence continues.

In Excerpt (3), focal learner Erat (Norway, score 9.0, which is the maximum score) and co-participants Tilde and Veronica have come upon the topic card statement 'People care too much about the latest fashion'. Veronica (lines 26–28) reads the statement and the full discussion instructions, after which there is a brief 0.8 second gap.

Excerpt (3)

NEST9_S0610AB [NO]

```

25  VER  ((picks up card))
26      ((reads)) u:h people care too much about the
27      latest fashion (.) agree disagree explain
28      why and give (.) examples. ((stops reading))
29      (0.8)
30  ERA → u:h yes::
31  TIL → ye[:h,
32  VER  [HHHR[Rh+((coughs))
33      +nods
34  ERA → [a lo:t.h
35  TIL  [people:,
36  TIL → +mhm:=+
37      +nods +nods
38  VER → =m:
39  TIL → m: yes they do:

```

In line 30, Erat offers a first agreeing response to the statement Veronica has read aloud. It is an emphatic 'u:h yes::', with a falling intonation at the end, which comes off as a definitive stance-taking. Tilde immediately produces an agreement token in line 31, and Veronica nods twice in a display of agreement with her co-participants' responses. In line 34, Erat qualifies his agreement with the statement with an assessment: 'a

lo:t .h', which functions as an upgrade of the strength of his initial agreement. In line 35, Tilde initiates, but abandons, what seems to be an account of some kind, and instead restarts her turn with an emphatic 'mhm:' (line 36) accompanied by two slow nods. At this point, all three participants have displayed to each other their definitive agreement with the stance in the task prompt. Despite this achievement of intersubjectivity, Veronica adds another agreement token (line 38) and so does Tilde in line 39, followed by a minimal elaboration of her agreeing responses: 'yes they do:', which further specifies what she agrees with: that 'they' (people) care too much about the latest fashion. Excerpt 3 differs from the previous two in that participants seem adamant in showing their strong agreement with the task prompt, and doing so over several turns, without yet producing any accounts or elaborations on their agreement, aside from Erat's upgraded agreement and Tilde's specification (i.e., her elaborated and more precise description of which part of the task statement she agrees with). Participants draw on several resources for displaying to each other: sequentially fitted and varied agreement tokens (*u:h yes*, *ye:h*, *mhm.*, *m.*), embodied displays of agreement (nodding), and emphasis through prolonged vowels and stress. We will return to the subsequent trajectory of this sequence in the second part of our analysis.

Excerpt (4) showcases focal learner Stefaan (Flanders, score 7.7, the highest score in the Flanders dataset), and co-participants Sam and Axel. It is Stefaan who reads aloud the topic card ('People care too little about their neighbors'), and he also immediately reveals his own stance in line 41 (*I agree*) accompanied by a right-hand gesture, which is not directed specifically at any of his co-participants, but rather seems to place emphasis on the word 'agree'. Co-participants do not take the turn at the possible transition point after line 41, and Stefaan immediately produces an account for his agreement. During its production, which projects his viewpoint ('a good relationship with'), Axel nods twice, thus displaying active listenership, and possibly also agreement (line 43):

Excerpt (4)

NEST9 S50C4A [FL]

40 STE people care too little about their
41 → neighbors (.) I agree:
+right palm gesture
42 I think- (.) >I think a good relationship
43 with your neighbors is+
AXE +nods twice
44 STE pretty important actually cuz,+
+hand gesture
45 SAM ye:h+
STE +shifts gaze to SAM
46 SAM if you're like on a vacation and you have
47 PETs you can ask your neighbors [tu::h=
48 AXE [I- I=
49 SAM =take care of your ↑pets

Stefaan halts his initiate account after the assessment ‘pretty important actually cuz’ (line 44), and Sam produces a minimal agreement token (*ye:h*), which does not up- or downgrade Stefaan’s assessment (cf. Excerpts (5)–(7) below). Instead, in lines 46–47 and 49, Sam offers his own account which builds on the premise of Stefaan’s turn—that it is indeed important to maintain good neighbor relationships, and offers his own example—that neighbors can help you take care of your pets when you go on vacation.

Excerpt (4) shows how an immediate display of agreement with the task statement leads to a display of stance through assessments (*good, pretty important*), which sets the interactional environment up for a preference for agreeing with Stefaan's expressed viewpoint. While Stefaan abandons his elaboration (*cuz*), Sam displays agreement with his overall assessment and builds on it with his own account. Axel shows attentiveness to ongoing talk through nodding at a point where Stefaan has projected where he is going (i.e., toward a positive view of neighbor relationships), and overlaps with Sam in line 48 in what subsequently turns out to be a partial disagreement followed by an account. In sum, participants show attentive listening before producing any agreement, but

as soon as Stefaan's stance has been made public, Sam and Axel begin contributing to the interaction through agreement tokens and accounts.

We will now turn to another sequential environment for agreement in the sample: assessments and their subsequent agreeing responses through Excerpts (5) to (7).

Agreement with first assessments

As has been well documented in conversation analytic research, there is an interactional preference for agreeing with first assessments (Pomerantz 1984; Sacks 1987). The next set of extracts show how first assessments are responded to by L2 speakers in our dataset. It is important to point out that first and second assessments do not occur in all seven tests, and where they occur, they were mainly found in three of the seven tests, which (co-incidentally or not) feature the two top-scoring learners in the Norwegian sample (Erat, test id NEST9NO_03 and Bella, test id NEST9NO_01) and the highest-scoring learner in the Flemish sample (Stefaan, test id NEST9FL_01). In the remaining recordings, viewpoints are generally expressed in 'I think' claims, which do not carry the same affective quality as, for example, 'that is just horrible'. They were also generally followed by a mirroring claim from another co-participant, rather than by a second assessment of the same assessable. For this reason, the excerpts presented below are drawn from two of the three tests listed above (Bella and Stefaan).

We begin with Excerpt (5) where Stefaan responds immediately after having read aloud the card statement (lines 50–52). In line 52, Stefaan latches an *oh*-prefaced expression of stance onto the end of his reading, and it functions as an assessment of the situation outlined in the card prompt (i.e., that other people comment on an ongoing movie). Stefaan's strong affective formulation (*Oh I REALLY HATE it*) is subsequently responded to by Sam, who displays agreement with the first assessment and also *upgrades* it (*°ah- yeah it's- it's the worst, °*) (cf. Pomerantz 1984: 66) to not only something to 'hate', but that is also 'the worst' one can experience:

Excerpt (5)

NEST9_S50C4A [FL]

- 50 STE u:h +people- people are commenting while
+starts reading
51 you're watching a movie+=
+stops reading
52 STE → =↑OH I REAlly HATE it
53 SAM → °ah- yeah it's- it's the worst, °
54 STE if- if people are talking (.) whi:lst I'm
55 watching a movie I:: ((continued extended turn))

Having received Sam's agreement through an upgraded assessment, Stefaan elaborates on the hypothetical scenario with an account of what he would do if he were watching a movie and other people were talking. In this sequence, thus, Stefaan and Sam competently manage the preference organization of agreeing with first assessments.

In Excerpt (6), featuring focal learner Bella and co-participants Karine and Kate, a topic card about gender and equal rights is read by Karine in lines 56–58. Similarly to Excerpt (3) earlier, we see a series of emphatic displays of agreement with the statement (i.e., that people do not care enough about equal rights for men and women) (lines 59–64):

Excerpt (6)

NEST9_S0310F [NO]

56 KAR 'kay +people care to little about equal=
 57 +starts reading
 58 =rights for men and women+
 +stops reading
 59 KAT ↑O::h ↑ye:ah.
 60 BEL ((nodding))
 61 BEL £Ye:[ah£
 62 [£Ye:ah£
 63 BEL uh-huh?
 64 KAT that's- (.) ye:ah.
 65 KAR especially °young b- boys°=
 66 BEL →=£The AUDACITY (.) that some of them g(hh)uys
 67 h(hh)ere ha(hh)ve£
 68 KAT yeah,
 69 BEL →it's CRAzy↓.
 70 (.)
 71 BEL u:hm,

In this series of expressions of strong agreement, we see participants showing each other their agreeing stance through response cries (↑O::h ↑ye:ah.), smile voices and exchanges of smiles (lines 61–62), nodding (line 60), different agreement tokens (lines 61–64) and exchange of gaze between all participants. In line 65, Karine adds a specification of who cares the least (young boys), to which Bella responds by seemingly accepting Karine's specification, and narrowing it down further to boys in their school. This is done through a strong assessment of some of the boys: '£The AUDACITY (.) that some of them g(hh)uys h(hh)ere ha(hh)ve£', labeling same-age boys as having audacity, and her dismissive stance is visible in how her turn is produced with an animated tone and through laughter. However, despite the strong assessment, neither Karine nor Kate reciprocate with a second assessment (either up- or downgraded or at the same level), but Karine only produces minimal agreement in line 68. A speculative theory here is that the meaning of the advanced lexical item *audacity* may not be entirely clear to co-participants. Bella, together with Erat, are the only two learners in our sample who were awarded the

maximum score on the test (9.0). Furthermore, Bella has been raised in a bilingual English–Norwegian home, so her access to advanced vocabulary may far exceed that of her co-participants. When no second assessment is forthcoming, Bella produces one herself in line 69: ‘it’s CRAzy’, and the preference structure is thereby maintained. For joint agreement to be fully realized, all participants must achieve shared understanding of what the ‘agreeable’ is, and in this case, it is at least possible that Karine and Kate did not fully grasp the meaning of a word, which made a fitted response more difficult and interactionally risky.

Having demonstrated the most common types of agreement in our dataset, we now turn to the examination of an extended sequence where we argue that initial agreement actually opens up and expands the interactional trajectory, rather than contributing to the closing of a task-based interaction.

An extended agreement sequence

In Excerpt (7), we meet Erat, Tilde, and Veronica again, and the sequence begins with the series of displays of agreement we examined in Excerpt (3). As participants have displayed their strong affiliation with the gist of the task prompt, Erat inserts what seems to be an initiation of further topical talk in line 13, which is continued in line 15 and presented as an ‘example’ of the phenomenon under discussion. Through gaze and embodied demonstration, Erat addresses each of his two co-participants by physically bending down and pointing to their pants under the table, while identifying their pants as ‘baggy jeans’, and he includes himself in his demonstration (lines 16–22):

Excerpt 7a

NEST9_S0610AB [NO]

72 ERA =an' I know what you mean; (.) like she::
 73 U::hm (.) when she first wz here like her
 74 first day she had a really cool like unique
 75 out[fit?
 76 TIL [yeah a- and uh a:: (0.7) SWEater.
 77 VER °mm:° ((nods))
 78 TIL that [I loved,
 79 ERA [↑↑YE::ah the: really pretty sweater
 80 with the heart?
 81 ERA an' it wz like- an' I wz like o:kay she
 82 looks really g(hh)ood,

In line 22, Erat recycles and emphasizes that his previous demonstration is ‘just one example?’, presumably of the gist of the statement that people care too much about the latest fashion. Throughout his embodied demonstration, Tilde and Veronica have gazed attentively at Erat, who also shifts his gaze pointedly with each pointing to their pants, and Tilde offers an uptake token in line 21, and another in line 23. Besides this, co-participants orient to a projected completion of the demonstration and wait for Erat to develop his description into an account. In line 24, Erat sums up the gist of his prior talk by a formulation, which assesses the similar baggy jeans of the group as ‘normal’ in terms of wanting to fit in at school. Both Tilde and Veronica produce agreement tokens (lines 28–29), and in line 31, Tilde initiates a new action, where she appeals to their shared knowledge of a ‘new student’ in the school. This is done with a rising intonation at the end of her turn, which invites co-participants to confirm their understanding of the referent. Erat acknowledges her confirmation request (line 32).

As the sequence continues in Excerpt 7b, Tilde launches a type of storytelling sequence about the new student, which includes a positive assessment of ‘↑COOL CLOTHES?’, but describes a gradual change in her way of dressing lately (lines 36–38), after which her story is clearly oriented to Erat’s prior talk about fitting in (line 26 above), with the ‘new student’ as a poignant example of their shared viewpoint. In lines 40–41, Tilde expresses concern that her peer pressure may be the reason behind the change in style, expressed with an embodied demonstration of ‘pushing’ (line 40).

Excerpt 7b

33 TIL she come with like (.) e:hm (.) some (0.6)
 34 ↑COOL CLOTHES?
 35 ERA m-hm,
 36 TIL but over time (.) I've seen her .hhh like
 37 put on (.) e::h (.) some other clothes
 38 likeu::h a (.) hoodie and more .h ↑jeans (.)
 39 just to fit in?
 40 and I hope we don't like (.) e:hm +PUSH her
 + push gesture
 41 TIL [tu:h
 42 ERA [no:
 43 VER mm: ((nods))
 44 ERA I hope we don't lose her crea[tivity
 45 TIL [↑Yeah
 46 ERA cuz she has really cool stle=
 47 TIL yeah.
 48 ERA =an' I know what you mean; (.) like she::
 49 U::hm (.) when she first wz here like her
 50 first day she had a really cool like unique
 51 out[fit?

Erat produces an agreeing 'no' to Tilde's negatively formatted turn (*I hope we don't*), and Veronica nods in agreement. Erat elaborates on Tilde's talk with an elegantly formulated concern of his own: 'I hope we don't lose her creativity', followed by a positive assessment of the new student as the gist of their shared concerns (*cuz she has really cool style*, lines 44 and 46). Erat elaborates on Tilde's first storytelling further in lines 48–51, showing that he understands and agrees with Tilde's point about the change in the new student's style since arriving through his own telling of the student's first day. This includes another high-grade assessment of the girl's 'really cool like unique outfit' on the first day. In our final extract, which continues beyond the transcript presented, we see how the establishment of joint agreement early on makes possible further accounting, collaborative storytelling, and elaboration.

In Excerpt 7c, Erat has just identified a particular day (*the girl's first day in school*) and an outfit she wore that day, which has not been described further other than through a positive assessment as 'cool' and 'unique'. Drawing on their shared knowledge (cf. Asmuß 2011; Sandlund

2022), Tilde enthusiastically displays recognition of the outfit in question, and describes it in line 52:

Excerpt 7c

51 out[fit?
 52 TIL [yeah a- and uh a:: (0.7) SWEater.
 53 VER °mm:° ((nods))
 54 TIL that [I loved,
 55 ERA [↑↑YE::ah the: really pretty sweater
 56 with the heart?
 57 ERA an' it wz like- an' I wz like o:kay she
 58 looks really g(hh)ood,
 TIL + turns away and glances at cards
 59 (0.3)
 60 ERA and then .hhh (.) she jzt started wearing
 61 like je:ans you know [and like
 62 TIL [yeh
 63 ERA more like low ke:y (.) like the rest of the
 64 class?
 65 ERA and I wz like (.) okay .h you don't stand
 66 out any more and I feel like (.) it's a
 67 bummer? (.) you know?
 68 TIL ye:ah (.) so: (.) I- I'd-
 69 ERA +hand movement, palm up toward VER, smiling
 70 TIL >yeah +fyou can talkf
 +gestures towards VER
 71 VER I feel like (.) .hhrm more like (...) ((new
 72 topical angle initiated))

Tilde, in line 54, adds to her own description an affective stance (*that I loved*); thus, further assessing the outfit positively. In overlap, Erat agrees through an upgraded second assessment while simultaneously adding more detail to their shared recognition of the clothing item in question (lines 55–56, *the really pretty sweater with the heart*). Through a formulation of his own reported thought (cf. Haakana 2007) at the time, Erat adds yet another assessment, but situates it in the past in terms of what he thought on that first day. He continues to show understanding of Tilde's original point in lines 60–64 by reformulating, from his own experience,

the change in the new student's style. Another instance of reported thought is produced in lines 65–67 (*and I wz like (.) okay .h you don't stand out any more*) followed by an assessment (*I feel like (.) it's a bummer? (.) you know?*), where the turn-final 'you know' both appeals to shared knowledge and inviting confirmation. Tilde produces an agreeing 'ye:ah', and initiates a next action (line 68), but simultaneously, Erat has shifted his gaze to Veronica, explicitly inviting her to participate with gaze and a hand gesture, as she has been relatively quiet so far. Tilde concedes the turn to Veronica, who continues with a slightly different angle on the topic from line 71 and onwards.

While Erat, Veronica, and Tilde stick to the script and base their conversation on the prompt, they also expand the sequence to include joint personal experiences through collaborative storytelling and consecutive assessments. What begins as a sequence with the establishment of mutual agreement (Excerpt 7a) without any further elaboration or accounting, subsequently develops into a trajectory where mainly Erat and Tilde take turns showing their agreement through formulations of personal experience (storytelling) and assessments (as identification devices and as displays of overall agreement with the joint stance taken on the card statement). While Erat certainly stands out in many ways in our sample, not only in his top score, but also in his pronunciation, fitted L2 actions, context-shaped and recipient-designed turns, and use of a range of vocal, verbal, and embodied resources for contributing to the establishment of shared, accounted-for agreement, the co-participants certainly benefit from his IC, which allows them to participate actively. In our next and final section, we discuss some aspects of L2 IC as visible in agreement sequences in elicited, assessed conversations.

Conclusion and implications

Interactional competences are 'key to learning, academic or professional selection, identity construction, workplace socialization, professional integration and much more' (Pekarek Doehler and Petitjean 2017: 1). For language learners, the L2-specific practices must be learned through recurrent participation in L2 interaction, through input such as media or through explicit teaching. Educators and raters need to be familiar with not only the practices that may differ between learners' first language and the target language, and what constitutes effective and competent conduct for a particular aspect of second language IC. In this paper, we have zeroed in

on a common, but hitherto under-researched area of L2 IC: the joint accomplishment of agreement sequences among L2 learners of the same age in two educational contexts, Norway and Flanders. We have focused on how learners, in elicited speaking test conversations, manage agreement with both the test prompts and with each other, and how their conduct can serve as evidence of L2 IC.

Our findings point to learners' awareness of a preference for agreeing with first assessments (cf. Pomerantz 1984; Sacks 1987), and of the conditional relevance of accounts following expressions of agreement with a test prompt in the form of a statement. Participants have also demonstrated how the establishment of mutual agreement among all participants, often accomplished in several steps of displaying agreeing stances to one another, opens up for extended accounts and explanations to substantiate a stance taken in the initial agreement, and for joint storytelling based on shared knowledge and experience (cf. Sandlund 2022). Participants also show affiliation with each other's contributions, and for the most part align with prior action in their responses (cf. Steensig 2019). Participants also display competence in drawing on vocal, verbal, and embodied resources in displaying agreement and affiliation.

Overall, the high-scoring focal learners do interactional work to the benefit of co-participants, by setting examples for the types of contributions that are appropriate and possible in a given slot, and by inviting co-participant viewpoints and responding attentively to their talk. We also observed how a highly proficient learner offered an assessment which may have been difficult to understand fully, in which the learner offers the second agreeing assessment when a co-participant response was absent (see Excerpt 6).

A learner's toolkit for doing disagreement has been shown to develop over time into an increasingly wider range of context-sensitive ways of disagreeing (Čekaitė 2007; Hüttner 2014; Pekarek Doehler and Pochon-Berger 2011). While agreement is generally a preferred action (Sacks 1987) and thus less interactionally delicate, we believe that the agreement sequences examined here show that highly proficient L2 learners of English also display a wide range of practices for jointly accomplishing agreement sequences. This observation can inform the scientific description and educational assessment of L2 IC. Furthermore, our findings concerning participants' varying orientations to the test prompt for displaying agreement reveals something about how task-based

interactions can range from being relatively constrained by the prompts (such as the reliance on the suggested ‘I agree’ formulation), to extended sequences which do not sound like elicited test conversations, but rather, like natural conversations between peers. It is perhaps at the heart of the preference for agreement in social interaction that the establishment of joint agreement facilitates the relaxed sharing of experiences and viewpoints, free of the burden of projected disagreement and disaffiliation.

Acknowledgment

We are grateful to all school leaders and teachers who opened their classroom doors to us for data collection in their classes. We are grateful to all students who answered the questionnaire and generously participated in the video-recorded speaking tests. Thanks to the raters for their work with the assessments. This work was supported by the Research Council of Norway [grant number 314229] and the Research Council of Flanders [grant number G052821N].

References

- Asmuß, Birte. 2011. Proposing shared knowledge as a means of pursuing agreement. In *The morality of knowledge in conversation*, edited by Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada and Jakob Steensig, 207–234. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Borger, Linda. 2019. Assessing interactional skills in a paired speaking test: Raters’ interpretation of the construct. *Apples* 13(1): 151–174. <https://doi.org/10.17011/apples/urn.201903011694>.
- Busby, Nicole L. 2024. Exploring the effects of early extramural English exposure on the vocabulary size of university students. *Education Sciences* 14(4): 372. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14040372>.
- Byman Frisé, Liliann, Pia Sundqvist, and Erica Sandlund. 2021. Policy in practice: Teachers’ conceptualizations of L2 English oral proficiency as operationalized in high-stakes test assessment. *Languages* 6(4): 204. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages6040204>.
- Čekaitė, Asta. 2007. A child’s development of interactional competence in a Swedish L2 classroom. *The Modern Language Journal* 91(1): 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2007.00509.x>.

- De Wilde, Vanessa, Marc Brysbaert, and June Eyckmans. 2020. Learning English through out-of-school exposure: Which levels of language proficiency are attained and which types of input are important? *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 23(1): 171–185. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728918001062>.
- De Wilde, Vanessa, Marc Brysbaert, and June Eyckmans. 2021. Young learners' L2 English after the onset of instruction: Longitudinal development of L2 proficiency and the role of individual differences. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 24(3): 439–453. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728920000747>.
- Dings, Abby. 2014. Interactional competence and the development of alignment activity. *The Modern Language Journal* 98(3): 742–756. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12120>.
- Drew, Paul. 2005. The interactional generation of exaggerated versions in conversations. In *Syntax and lexis in conversation: Studies on the use of linguistic resources in talk-in-interaction*, edited by Auli Hakulinen and Margret Selting, 233–255. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Du Bois, John W., and Elise Kärkkäinen. 2012. Taking a stance on emotion: Affect, sequence, and intersubjectivity in dialogic interaction. *Text & Talk* 32(4): 433–451. <https://doi.org/10.1515/text-2012-0021>.
- Garfinkel, Harold. 1967. *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Hall, Joan Kelly. 1995. 'Aw, man, where you goin'?': Classroom interaction and the development of L2 interactional competence. *Issues in Applied Linguistics* 6(2): 37–62.
- Hall, Joan Kelly, John Hellermann, and Simona Pekarek Doehler (eds.). 2011. *L2 interactional competence and development*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Hall, Joan Kelly, and Simona Pekarek Doehler. 2011. L2 interactional competence and development. In *L2 interactional competence and development*, edited by Joan Kelly Hall, John Hellermann, and Simona Pekarek Doehler, 1–18. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Hellermann, John, and Simona Pekarek Doehler. 2010. On the contingent nature of language-learning tasks. *Classroom Discourse* 1(1): 25–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19463011003750657>.

- Heritage, John, and Paul Drew. 1992. Analyzing talk at work: An introduction. In *Talk at work: Interaction in institutional settings*, edited by Paul Drew and John Heritage, 3–65. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hüttner, Julia. 2014. Agreeing to disagree: ‘Doing disagreement’ in assessed oral L2 interactions. *Classroom Discourse* 5(2): 194–215. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19463014.2014.893897>.
- Haakana, Markku. 2007. Reported thought in complaint stories. In *Reporting talk*, edited by Elizabeth Holt and Rebecca Clift, 150–178. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jefferson, Gail. 2004. Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction. In *Conversation analysis: Studies from the first generation*, edited by Gene H. Lerner, 13–31. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Kaldahl, Anne-Grete, Andreas Bachinger, and Gert Rijlaarsdam. 2019. Oracy matters: Introduction to the special issue on oracy. *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature* 19: 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.17239/L1ESLL-2019.19.03.06>.
- Kasper, Gabriele, and Steven J. Ross. 2013. Assessing second language pragmatics: An overview and introductions. In *Assessing second language pragmatics*, edited by Steven J. Ross and Gabriele Kasper, 1–40. Bristol: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kasper, Gabriele, and Johannes Wagner. 2011. A conversation-analytic approach to second language acquisition. In *Alternative approaches to second language acquisition*, edited by Dwight Atkinson, 117–142. New York: Routledge.
- Kramsch, Claire. 1986. From language proficiency to interactional competence. *The Modern Language Journal* 70(4): 366–372. <https://doi.org/10.2307/326815>.
- Kunitz, Silvia, Johan Berggren, Maria Haglind, and Anna Löfquist. 2022. Getting students to talk: A practice-based study on the design and implementation of problem-solving tasks in the EFL classroom. *Languages* 7(2): 75. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages7020075>.
- Millet, Ido. 2016. The relationship between grading leniency and grading reliability. *Studies in Higher Education*: 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1265497>.

- NAFS Project. n.d. *Nationellt prov i engelska för årskurs 9 [English National Test Year 9]*. <https://www.gu.se/nationella-prov-frammande-sprak/prov-och-bedomningsstod-i-engelska/engelska-arskurs-7-9/nationellt-prov-i-engelska-for-arskurs-9>.
- Nanbu, Zachary, and Tim Greer. 2023. Creating obstacles to progressivity: Task expansion in second language role-plays. *TESOL Quarterly* 57(4): 1364–1400. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3197>.
- Nguyen, Hanh thi. 2012. *Developing interactional competence: A conversation-analytic study of patient consultations in pharmacy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pekarek Doehler, Simona. 2018. Elaborations on L2 interactional competence: The development of L2 grammar-for-interaction. *Classroom Discourse* 9(1): 3–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19463014.2018.1437759>.
- Pekarek Doehler, Simona, and Claire Petitjean. 2017. Introduction: Interactional competences in institutional settings—young people between school and the workplace. In *Interactional competences in institutional settings: From school to the workplace*, edited by Simona Pekarek Doehler, Aline Bangerter, Geneviève de Weck, Laurent Filliettaz, Elena González-Martínez, and Claire Petitjean, 1–26. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pekarek Doehler, Simona, and Estelle Pochon-Berger. 2011. Developing ‘methods’ for interaction: A cross-sectional study of disagreement sequences in French L2. In *L2 interactional competence and development*, edited by Joan Kelly Hall, John Hellermann, and Simona Pekarek Doehler, 206–243. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Pomerantz, Anita. 1984. Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: Some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes. In *Structures of social action*, edited by J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage, 57–101. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Puimège, Eva, and Elke Peters. 2019. Learners’ English vocabulary knowledge prior to formal instruction: The role of learner-related and word-related factors. *Language Learning* 69(4): 943–977. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lang.12364>.
- Ross, Steven J., and Gabriele Kasper (eds.). 2013. *Assessing second language pragmatics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Sacks, Harvey. 1987. On the preferences for agreement and contiguity in sequences in conversation. In *Talk and social organisation*, edited by Graham Button and John R. E. Lee, 54–69. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Sacks, Harvey, Emanuel A. Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson. 1974. A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking in conversation. *Language* 50(4): 696–735. <https://doi.org/10.2307/412243>.
- Salaberry, M. Rafael, and Silvia Kunitz. 2019a. Introduction. In *Teaching and testing L2 interactional competence: Bridging theory and practice*, edited by M. Rafael Salaberry and Silvia Kunitz, 1–22. Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Salaberry, M. Rafael, and Silvia Kunitz (eds.). 2019b. *Teaching and testing L2 interactional competence: Bridging theory and practice*. Oxford and New York: Routledge.
- Sandlund, Erica. 2022. Telling in a test: Storytelling and task accomplishment in L2 oral proficiency assessment. In *Storytelling practices in home and educational contexts: Perspectives from conversation analysis*, edited by Anna Filipi, Binh Thanh Ta, and Maryanne Theobald, 175–200. Singapore: Springer.
- Sandlund, Erica, and Pia Sundqvist. 2019. Doing versus assessing interactional competence. In *Teaching and testing L2 interactional competence: Bridging theory and practice*, edited by M. Rafael Salaberry and Silvia Kunitz, 357–396. Oxford and New York: Routledge.
- Schegloff, Emanuel A. 2007. *Sequence organization in interaction: A primer in conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Seedhouse, Paul. 2013. Oral proficiency interviews as varieties of interaction. In *Assessing second language pragmatics*, edited by Steven J. Ross and Gabriele Kasper, 199–219. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Steensig, Jakob. 2019. Conversation analysis and affiliation and alignment. In *The concise encyclopedia of applied linguistics*, edited by Carol A. Chapelle, 248–253. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Stivers, Tanya. 2008. Stance, alignment, and affiliation during storytelling: When nodding is a token of affiliation. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 41(1): 31–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08351810701691123>.

- Stivers, Tanya, Lorenza Mondada, and Jakob Steensig. 2011. Knowledge, morality and affiliation in social interaction. In *The morality of knowledge in conversation*, edited by Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada, and Jakob Steensig, 3–24. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sundqvist, Pia. 2009. Extramural English matters: Out-of-school English and its impact on Swedish ninth graders' oral proficiency and vocabulary. PhD thesis, Karlstad University. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:275141/FULLTEXT03.pdf>.
- Sundqvist, Pia. 2024. Extramural English as an individual difference variable in L2 research: Methodology matters. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 44: 79–91. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190524000072>.
- Sundqvist, Pia, Elke Peters, Gry Børge Skar, and Henrik Gyllstad. 2025. Study protocol: Starting age and extramural English: Learning English in and outside of school in Norway and Flanders (STAGE). *Forum for Linguistic Studies* 7(8): 793–809. <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i8.10412>.
- Sundqvist, Pia, and Erica Sandlund. 2024. *Testing talk: Ways to assess second language oral proficiency*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Sundqvist, Pia, Peter Wikström, Erica Sandlund, and Lina Nyroos. 2018. The teacher as examiner of L2 oral tests: A challenge to standardization. *Language Testing* 35(2): 217–238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532217690782>.
- Swedish National Agency for Education. 2014. *English. Ämnesprov, läsår 2013/2014. Lärarinformation inklusive bedömningsanvisningar till Delprov A. Årskurs 9*. Stockholm: Swedish National Agency for Education.
- Tecedor, Marta. 2016. Beginning learners' development of interactional competence: Alignment activity. *Foreign Language Annals* 49(1): 23–41. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12177>.
- University of Oslo. n.d. *Nettskjema* [software]. <https://nettskjema.no/>.
- Young, Richard F. 1999. Sociolinguistic approaches to SLA. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 19: 105–132. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190599190068>.

- Young, Richard Frederick, and Agnes Weiyun He (eds.). 1998. *Talking and testing: Discourse approaches to the assessment of oral proficiency*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Zhang, Ying. 2016. Development of second language interactional competence: Agreement and disagreement negotiation by learners of Mandarin. PhD thesis, University of Melbourne. <https://hdl.handle.net/11343/91968>.

Appendix: Transcription notations

(0.5)	silences in tenths of seconds
(.)	silence shorter than 0.2 seconds
.hh	audible inbreaths, the more h's the longer
hh	audible exhalations, the more h's, the longer
↑	pitch rise
↓	pitch lowering
.	turn-final falling intonation
,	phrase-final intonation (more to come)
ˆ	slight rise in intonation, usually at end of turn
=	latching
°soft°	spoken softly or with lower volume
[]	overlapping talk
e:	creaky voice
.pt	lip smack
>oh	jump-started talk (rapid start)
< slow>	produced more slowly than surrounding talk
>fast<	produced more rapidly than surrounding talk
→	highlighting point of analysis
(word)	uncertain transcription, number of syllables (1)
((word))	transcriptionist comments
£hey£	smile voice (or £hey£)
a::h	lengthening of sound
<u>word</u>	stress on word or sound
LOUD	spoken in louder voice
<i>italics</i>	code-switching
+gaze up	onset of nonverbal behavior in relation to talk, e.g., gaze and gesture