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The role of gestures in achieving understanding in Early English teaching in Denmark

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A unique characteristic of many foreign language classes, including those in Danish primary schools, is that the foreign language is both content and medium of instruction. That is, students are taught in a language that they are not yet very familiar with. Foreign language teachers can make use of several resources to make their talk more comprehensible, not only obvious ones such as translations to the L1 and providing pictures or realia, but also gestures. This paper investigates gestures employed by the teacher in the pursuit of intersubjectivity in early English teaching in a private primary school in Denmark. The use of multimodal resources employed by teachers in foreign language classrooms has been studied by e.g. Muramoto (1999), Lazaraton (2004), Taleghani-Nikazm (2008), Eskildsen & Wagner (2013), Sert (2015). This research has established gestures as a pervasive phenomenon in language classrooms, used in the service of establishing intersubjectivity, explaining new vocabulary, indexing previous shared experiences, and – in a more principled manner of speaking – how effective use of gestures is a crucial component of a teacher's classroom interactional competence (Walsh 2006).

This paper brings this established agreement on the importance of gestures in classroom interaction to bear on early foreign language learning: Whereas prior work on gestures in L2 classrooms has predominantly dealt with adult L2 learners, this paper investigates the extent to which a teacher makes use of gestures in early child foreign language teaching. Using multimodal conversation analysis of three hours of classroom instruction in a Danish primary school, we uncover how a teacher uses gestures to enhance the comprehension of his L2 talk when teaching English in the 1st and 3rd grade, both of which are beginning levels following a school reform in Denmark in 2014.

In particular, we look at how the teacher combines deictic and iconic gestures with reformulations in the pursuit of the pupils' understanding – and how the children respond. Preliminary analyses indicate that the pupils orient to the teacher's embodied practices in their responses, either in the form of return gestures (de Fornel 1992), recyclings of the teacher's gestures to help other pupils understand the on-going discourse, or displayed task accomplishment. From the ethnomethodological and usage-based stance taken in this paper, these findings have important implications for early foreign language learning and teaching: processes of understanding are socially observable phenomena, made available by the participants through language or other semiotic resources, that must accompany learning. Therefore, the pursuit of pupils' displays of understanding is crucial for usage-based L2 learning to occur. The understanding and participation enabled by the teacher's embodied practices constitute, in this situation, the primordial scene where usage-based L2 learning begins (Eskildsen 2015).

Keywords: classroom interaction, young learners, foreign language learning, conversation analysis

