

**Title of Project:**

Assessing Interactional Affordances and Gains in the Study Abroad Homestay and the Language Classroom: A Conversation-Analytic Approach

**Researcher:**

Christopher Van Booven  
New York University  
[chris.vanbooven@gmail.com](mailto:chris.vanbooven@gmail.com)



Christopher Van Booven

**Research Supervisor:**

Dr. Lorena Llosa  
New York University

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## Final Report

**Motivation for the Research**

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the extent to which classroom-based and out-of-school contexts of target language interaction afford learners with comparable opportunities to participate in foundational practices of oral proficiency. To that end, this dissertation research offers a detailed qualitative examination of target language interaction in one well-established out-of-school context—the study abroad homestay—and a principled means of comparing these interactions with those afforded to the learner in the language classroom. The qualitative features of real-time, naturally occurring target language interaction in the study abroad homestay have been scarcely documented and never subjected to rigorous comparative analysis with classroom-based target language use. Understanding precisely what interactional opportunities are made available to learners in out-of-school contexts such as the homestay may illuminate critical aspects of oral proficiency that are comparatively underdeveloped during classroom instruction—and vice versa. I address this gap by conducting a comparative qualitative analysis of a language learner’s video- and audio-recorded target language interactions in the homestay and the classroom. Data are gathered at several time points throughout a semester-length study abroad program. Focusing on the foundational practices of topic management—which serve as a proxy for distinguishing between speaking proficiency levels in the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (Swender, Conrad, & Vicars, 2012)—I sought to address the following research questions:

**Research Questions**

1. How do the participants initiate new topics in each context?
2. Which ways (or ‘methods’) of initiating topics are used exclusively by the learner, exclusively by the proficient speaker, or by both learner and proficient speaker in each context?

**Research Methodology**

The data for this study took the form of video and audio recordings of real-time, unscripted second language interactions between one language learner and proficient speakers in each of two study abroad contexts: the homestay and the language classroom. Data were collected at three different time points throughout a semester-length study abroad program in the Dominican Republic. The final data set comprised approximately 18 hours of video and audio recordings, with nine hours of interactions from the homestay and nine hours of interactions from the language classroom.

Using digital video cameras mounted on a tripod, video and audio recordings were collected of host family-student interactions at mealtime in the homestay and instructor-student interactions during language instruction in the classroom. In the homestay, recordings commenced between 10 to 15 minutes prior to start of the meal and concluded approximately 30 minutes after the meal. In the classroom, recordings started prior to the beginning of the lesson and concluded following the end of the lesson, once students had been dismissed from the class. Video and audio data were transcribed and analyzed per the conventions of conversation analysis (Schegloff, 2007, as adapted by Wong & Waring, 2010).

As an analytic framework, conversation analysis (CA) relies on detailed transcripts of video- and audio-recorded naturally-occurring conversations to describe the shared system of verbal and nonverbal ‘methods’ that speakers—referred to as *participants*—use to participate in oral social interaction.

To address the first research question—*How do the participants initiate new topics in each context?*—I developed collections of all observed topic initiation sequences across the entire data set in which the learner had the opportunity to participate. For the purposes of this study, topic initiation refers to the practices of beginning a new sequence of topic talk using an “utterance which employs referents unrelated to prior talk in order to implicate a new set of mentionables” (Maynard, 1980, p. 280). Drawing on literature from conversation analysis on topic initiation methods (Button & Casey, 1984, 1985; Maynard, 1980, 1989; Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984; Mori, 2003; Svennevig, 1999, 2014), I conducted turn-by-turn analyses of the topic initiation sequences to identify all of the methods around which the participants organized the initiation of new topic talk. Lastly, I disaggregated the topic initiation sequences by context, noting which topic initiation methods appeared in the homestay and which were present in the language classroom, respectively.

To address the second research question—*Which ways (or ‘methods’) of initiating topics are used exclusively by the learner, exclusively by the proficient speaker, or by both learner and proficient speaker in each context?*—I identified which participant—learner or proficient speaker—had served as *the initiator* (i.e., had taken the first turn) of each topic initiation sequence. After disaggregating the topic initiation sequences by context and by initiator, I was able to determine which of the observed topic initiation methods had been deployed exclusively by the learner, exclusively by the proficient speaker, or by both learner and proficient speaker in the homestay and the language classroom, respectively.

### Summary of Findings

Analyses for the first research question—*How do the participants initiate new topics in each context?*—revealed that the participants deployed five distinct methods of initiating new topics across the two learning contexts. These included three methods of initiating recipient- (i.e., “listener”) related topic talk—*topic initial elicitors* (Button & Casey, 1984), *itemized news inquiries* (Button & Casey, 1985), *self-presentation elicitors* (Svennevig, 1999; 2014)—one method of initiating speaker-related topic talk—*news announcements* (Button & Casey, 1985)—and one method of initiating setting-related topic talk—*setting talk* (Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984). Looking at the use of methods across contexts, analyses revealed that all five methods were observed in both the homestay and the language classroom.

The first research question concerned only the presence (or absence) of methods in each context as a general affordance for participating in different types of topic initiation sequences. As opposed to this process, the second research question took into account who—that is, learner or proficient speaker—had the opportunity to use each of the five methods as the initiator of new topic talk in each context. This set of analyses revealed that the affordances for participating as an initiator of new topic talk differed by context, whereby the learner was observed to deploy a wider range of methods for initiating topic talk in the homestay than in the language classroom. Whereas the learner

made use of all five methods in the homestay, she only had the opportunity to use one of the five methods—news announcements—in the language classroom.

### Implications

The analyses of this dissertation revealed evidence of an equal, but inequitable distribution of topic initiation practices across classroom-based and out-of-school contexts of target language interaction. The distribution was equal in the sense that, if we conceptualize interactional affordances as simply the opportunity to participate in the *generation* of new topic talk—independent of who is doing the initiating—then the homestay and the language classroom afforded the learner opportunities to participate in sequences featuring an equally diverse repertoire of topic initiation methods—five methods in the homestay and the same five methods in the language classroom. However, when taking into account *who* was using each method to do the initiation, the distribution was inequitable. In the homestay, the learner had the opportunity to make use of all five methods as an initiator of new topic sequences, while in the language classroom she initiated topics using only one of five possible methods.

This dissertation provides evidence that the participation framework of the homestay, by equally accommodating learner's contributions to new topic talk in the roles of both speaker and recipient, may afford learners with opportunities to participate more actively in certain interactional practices than in the language classroom. This is an important finding in light of previous research on second language interaction in the homestay and other out-of-school contexts, such as informal conversation-for-learning groups, where learner-proficient speaker conversations have been reported to adopt a pedagogically-oriented 'institutional' character that often resembles "teacher-fronted classroom discourse" (Kasper, 2004, p. 563). With respect to study abroad, in contrast to reports that second language interaction in the homestay largely "entailed relying on instructional norms, whether introduced by native-speaking interlocutors or sought by non-native speakers" (Wilkinson's 2002, p. 169), my analyses revealed that the homestay afforded the learner opportunities to engage in interactional practices that were otherwise unavailable to her in the classroom. In short, the equitable contributions of both learner and proficient speaker participants to new topic talk in this dissertation offer preliminary evidence of the homestay as a context for target language interaction that not only takes place outside of the classroom but whose organization is also unencumbered by an institutional (i.e., formal pedagogical) agenda.

This work has important implications for research at the intersection between conversation analysis and the assessment of oral language proficiency. By drawing on empirical evidence from naturally-occurring target language conversations, language assessment researchers can develop refined constructs and measures of oral proficiency that better reflect the observed—rather than idealized—features of real-time, unscripted interaction. Specifically, this line of work establishes a clear warrant for a greater emphasis on target language *interactional competence* (e.g., Wong and Waring, 2010)—that is, learners' knowledge of the systematic verbal and non-verbal practices that enable speakers to produce the target language not in isolation, but in context-sensitive, turn-by-turn coordination with their fellow conversational participants. By moving beyond traditional assessment instruments that reduce interactional competence to abstracted displays of grammatical, lexical, or phonological knowledge, we can take important strides towards capturing the full range of interactional practices in which learners have the opportunity to engage across contexts.

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