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"We've got rhythm" - Exploring tempo in online interactions.

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If multimodality is gaining greater interest from CALL researchers (Guichon & Cohen, 2016; Helm & Dooly, 2017; Guichon & Tellier, 2017), the tempo of computer-mediated interactions remains largely overlooked in the CALL literature. Yet, it is crucial to achieve the notion of a “shared rhythm” between online interactants, especially if the exchange is focused on learning: despite the technical mishaps and the resulting lags (Kern, 2015), rhythm makes the interaction more fluid, creates a greater sense of immediacy and helps participants attain “interactional bliss” (Cosnier, 2008).

Online language-learning interactions may be considered as focused encounters (Auer et al., 1999). In temporal terms, the focus of the encounter is on language learning-teaching activities and not, for example, creating social bonds. Thus, time and floor are limited resources and turn-taking mechanisms require a single focus of interaction to be operative and the interactional rhythm requires a common ‘clock’ in order to be functional.

The context of the research presented in this paper is the telecollaborative project ISMAEL (InteractionS and Multimodality in LAnguage LEarning) which brought together 12 trainee teachers of French as a foreign language and 18 undergraduate Business students studying at an Irish university. Over a six-week period, the participants met online in the webconferencing platform Visu (Bétrancourt et al. 2011) for weekly sessions that lasted around 40 minutes. All interaction data was recorded and multimodal transcriptions were completed using ELAN (Sloetjes & Wittenburg 2008). For the purposes of this study, the interaction data from three triads was examined. Transcriptions were annotated with regards to the amount of time the participants held the floor; the number of tokens used in speaking turns and the lengths of inter-turn silences and overlaps.

Adopting a quantitative approach, we examine, firstly, whether there is an acceleration in the rhythm of interactions over the course of the telecollaboration exchange once the participants became more familiar with their interlocutors, the situation and the technical peculiarities of videoconferencing and, secondly, whether different activity types (session openings/closings; role-play; reacting to an authentic document) required different interactional rhythms. Our results will be discussed with reference to qualitative data from post-session debriefings with the trainee teachers.

This study aims not only to enable us to gain a better understanding of how a shared rhythm is achieved, or not, in online teaching environments and whether certain activity types call for different tempos but also to offer sources for reflection for introducing the notions of rhythm, tempo, and pace of interactions within teacher-training programmes.

