

Interaction in Emergency Remote Higher Education: A Case Study

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Abstract

Emergency Remote Education (ERE) has provided an effective response to the education emergency created by the coronavirus outbreak. Teachers, lecturers and students have experimented with new teaching and learning strategies and digital tools, adjusting to the possibilities and the constraints of computer-mediated communication. This study investigates a case study to show how multimodal interaction, communication and engagement can be established during video lessons in English courses delivered in a university environment. Data collected through the participant observation of a 2-hour- online class will be analysed combining classroom discourse and multimodal analysis to investigate synchronous interaction and the different modes of meaning-making emerging during emergency remote teaching and learning. The goal of the present study is twofold: on the one hand, it aims to contribute to the discussion of the short-term and medium-term impact of wisdom gained during ERE on academic teaching in terms of interaction and multimodality. On the other hand, it sheds light on challenges and best practices revealed during ERE classes, which at the same time could contribute to improve lecturers' interactional competence in terms of ways of interacting and meaning-making in an instructional context.

Keywords: Emergency Remote Education - Classroom discourse analysis - Video lessons – Chat - Computer-mediated interaction

Introduction

In the spring 2020, due to the massive migration of education onto digital platforms, every teacher and lecturer and every student had to adjust to a new way of conceiving teaching and learning. The sudden shift of face-to-face courses onto digital platforms is referred to as Emergency Remote Education (ERE), or Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) and is defined as the unplanned and necessary educational response to the pandemic (Bozkurt, 2020). This emergency pedagogy must not be confused with distance learning, which is planned to happen online and relies on consolidated models and research (Schlesselman, 2020). On the contrary, as the pandemic is an

unprecedented phenomenon, ERE or ERT cannot draw on extensive studies or consolidated models.

It appeared clear from the beginning that Covid-19 was causing a major educational emergency (Unesco, 2020) for both wealthy and developing countries, regardless of their resources and would affect different cohorts of students (Bozkurt, 2020). Several issues of concern were raised and can be roughly grouped as follows: a) difficulties due to the lack of access to digital devices, an internet connection and a suitable learning environment (Hall *et al.*, 2020, Lai&Widmar, 2021), b) the multiple literacies needed to meet students' educational and emotional needs (Bali, 2020), c) perceptions of challenges and opportunities revealed by the emergency educational response in different contexts (Cameron-Standerford *et al.*, 2020, Erickson & Watthiaux, 2021). Even though the research on the ERE is taking its first steps, an initial survey of the literature shows that tertiary education institutions not only responded to the educational emergency but carried out studies on the students' and teachers' perceptions to identify best practices of quality education (Baldock *et al.*, 2020). For example, some positive aspects of ERT emerged, such as comfortable educational environments, efficient time utilization; at the same time, challenges were identified concerning network instability, reduced concentration, and insufficient interactions (Yoon, 2020, Shim&Lee, 2020).

Without being exhaustive, this brief overview aims to stress that ERE and its consequences are multifaceted and can be studied from various perspectives. As during the pandemic synchronous classes were provided through video conferencing tools, videoconferencing seems a relevant field of research. This article aims to contribute to investigating the phenomenon from the perspective of classroom discourse to analyse patterns of interactions between lecturer and students in the video-mediated setting. Indeed, as interaction was already considered a major issue of concern in distance education (Anderson, 2003, Cicillini & Salusso 2019), it seems germane to investigate how interaction has been achieved in video-mediated instructional settings under unforeseen and trying circumstances (Maydiantoro *et al.*, 2020, Cicillini&Giacosa 2020).

Before the pandemic, studies on video-mediated communication had already investigated video conferencing as a way to successfully interact (Sindoni 2011, 2012, 2014, 2019) and to support interactional exchanges in instructional contexts (Hampel&Stickler, 2012, Hampel&Pleines, 2013, Hampel& De Los Arcos, 2013, Austin *et al.*, 2017). Even though interaction is achieved in online classes, it seems relevant to observe how lecturers and students adjusted their way of interacting in lectures that had not been planned to be delivered online. Moreover, after an initial literature review on ERE, this perspective has not been investigated yet. To this end, a case study (a two-

hour online emergency class) will be presented and discussed by adopting a qualitative approach. It aims to identify ways in which interlocutors deployed the affordances provided by videoconferencing to compensate for the lack of physical proximity through and communicate successfully. To this purpose the following research questions will be addressed:

- 1 RQ what patterns are shown in interactions occurring in emergency video-mediated EFL classes?
- 2 RQ what opportunities and challenges characterize emergency online interactions?

First, the methodology will be presented by discussing how data has been gathered and analysed; secondly, the relevant patterns emerging from the analysis of a 2-hour- emergency EFL class will be identified; finally, data will be discussed in terms of challenges and opportunities and future lines of research in this field will be suggested. Even though it is limited to a 2-hour session and further and more extensive research is needed, this study could shed light on interactive possibilities related to video-conferencing, which could contribute to improving lecturers' interactional competence in video-mediated instructional environments.

Methodology:

In this paper a qualitative case study methodology is adopted in line with other studies exploring video-mediated and computer-mediated communication, as it is deemed as a useful approach to address questions relating to how interaction occurs in specific contexts (Sindoni 2020, Austin *et al.*, 2017). Data was collected through the participant observation of an online synchronous 2-hour class taught via Webex in March 2020, which was part of an English Linguistics course at the University of Turin⁵. Though unavoidably subjective, participant observation allows the researcher to collect data regarding the double perspective of the student and the lecturer. At the beginning of the lesson, the researcher was introduced to the attendees, who had already been informed about the presence of a participant observer and had been asked to state if they would agree to attend a class that was being observed. The researcher filled in a grid to collect general information about the class (number of attendees, the main topic dealt with, resources and tools), and took notes about the interactions between the lecturer and the students by writing down the verbal interventions and copying and pasting messages from the chat. To limit unspontaneous behaviour neither the lecturer nor the students knew that the focus of the observation was on the interactions.

⁵ The main findings reported in this paper are based on direct observation of an, which is part of a wider corpus of data collected between March and May 2020 as a part of a PhD study on interaction in Emergency EFL teaching.

At a later moment in time, identifying elements were anonymized to comply with privacy regulations. The lecturer was associated with the code RS_II_1A_L, while the students were identified with RS_II_1A_S and the progressive number given to every intervening student. Messages copied from the chat were preceded by the symbol #. The posts reported in the transcription objectively correspond to written intervention, whereas spoken turns were more difficult to document. Therefore, to increase data reliability, the researcher integrated the manual transcription with missing details from the lesson recording, which was available on the Moodle course page and provided the timing and the exact content of the spoken intervention.

Finally, the manual transcription of the interactions was analyzed by using the most common pattern of classroom discourse, namely triadic dialogue, which is also known as Initiation-Response-Feedback or Follow-up Sequence and has been studied since the 1970s (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975, Mehan, 1979 in Nassanij, 2000, Rezaje, & Lashkarian, 2015). As previous studies on video-mediated communication suggest, the concept of mode-switching will be applied to account for the multimodal quality of video-mediated interactions. This term paraphrases the linguistic notion of code-switching, which refers to the alternation of more than one language or variety in a conversation and seems very useful to describe a recurrent communicative strategy in emergency online classes (Sindoni, 2011, 2012, 2020).

Main Findings:

At the beginning of the observed online class, the lecturer introduced himself, welcomed the students and showed his slides by sharing his screen while keeping his camera on. While he interacted mainly verbally, the students typed messages in the chat window and kept their cameras off. The lesson was supposed to be taught in English, but the lecturer decided to introduce the lesson in Italian to make the students feel comfortable despite the unusual circumstances due to the unprecedented emergency.

From a preliminary analysis of the lesson transcription, it can be noticed that in the chat there were 134 posts, 133 typed by the students and one typed by the lecturer. In the first period of the lesson the lecturer and the students interacted in Italian (the lecturer spoke and read out the messages from the chat, the students typed their questions in the chat), while in the second period the lecturer started interacting in English, and the students carried on typing their posts either in Italian or in English (79% of the messages is in Italian, whereas 21% is in English).

As it was one of the introductory lessons (the course had just started when classes were moved online) students asked questions about the exam preparation and the assessment modality as well, therefore the most common pattern of interaction is composed of a question in the chat written by a student

and the verbal answer provided by the lecturer. Altogether students wrote in the chat 69 questions, 46 answers to the lecturer's questions, 14 comments, 3 thank you messages and 2 posts regarding technical problems. Almost all the students' interventions were addressed by the lecturer, who used the chat as a reminder, to provide answers and give feedback to the students' answers or comments; only four comments were overlooked (three of them were jokey comments and they might have been ignored on purpose).

The analysis of the interactions shows that the patterns IRF (Initiation-response -feedback), typical of classroom discourse, occurs 5 times: the lecturer initiated a sequence to encourage students to ask questions and checked if they had doubts (2 occurrences), tried to elicit students' previous knowledge on a topic (2 occurrences) and wanted to make sure they could access a certain webpage (1 occurrence). The following excerpt shows an example of how the conversation developed during the class. Originally it was a 46 turn- sequence, but for space constraints, only the salient passages are reported here. Every contribution to the conversation is numbered on the left; the symbol [...] refers to the omitted passages. The messages in Italian were translated by the researcher and reported in italics and brackets next to their English translation. The number at the end of the message in square brackets, on the right, refers to the timing of the interactions.

INITIATION A:

(1) RS_II_1A_L [...] This is my proposal. Shall we have them (our classes) in English? [...] (*La proposta è questa. La facciamo in inglese?*) [9:23]

RESPONSE A:

(2) RS_II_1A_S24 It's ok by me [...] (*va bene per me*) [9:23]
 # (4) RS_II_1A_S22 yes (*si*) [9:23]
 # (5) RS_II_1A_S25 yees in English please (*Siiii ingleseee please*) [9:23]
 [...]
 # (7) RS_II_1A_S21 Yeeeeees [9:23]
 [...]
 # (14) RS_II_1A_S2 shall we have a mix? (*facciamo un mix?*) [9:23]
 [...]
 # (19) RS_II_1A_S4 let's do it [9:23]
 [...]
 # (23) RS_II_1A_S16 yup [9:23]
 # (24) RS_II_1A_S17 Yes! [9:23]
 # (25) RS_II_1A_S5 but us too? (*ma anche noi?*) [9:23]
 [...]
 # (29) RS_II_1A_S34 absolutely yes ahahah (*assolutamente sì ahahah*) [9:23]
 [...]
 # (31) RS_II_1A_S17 deal [9:24]
 # (32) RS_II_1A_S7 I'm scared (*io ho paura*) [9:24]

FEEDBACK A

(33) RS_II_1A_L somebody has written “yup. Shall we have a mix?”, well, no mix please, no. “us too?” yes, but no mix please. “I’m scared”. Good, let’s face our fears. (*qualcuno scrive yup. facciamo il mix? Ecco, no il mix no ma anche noi? Ecco il mix no io ho paura, ma bene affrontiamo le nostre paure*) [9:23- 9:24]

[...]

(35) RS_II_1A_S20 me too (*anche io*) [9:24]

INITIATION B:

(36) RS_II_1A_L Okey dokey. Where does English come from? [9:24]

RESPONSE A BIS:

(37) // RS_II_1A_S2 (by mixing) I mean, when you think something is difficult to understand you can translate it (*mix, nel senso, quando pensa di aver espresso una cosa difficile lo traduce*) [9:24]

[...]

FEEDBACK B:

(46) RS_II_1A_L The language of the Celts. I’m writing it in the chat.

(47) RS_II_1A_L The Celts [9:47]

The lecturer started two IRFs by verbally asking a question to elicit feedback from students (Initiation A, Initiation B), while the students provided responses only to the first one by typing their answers in the chat. *Initiation A* (this is my proposal. Shall we talk in English?) received 32 Responses: “it’s ok” (7 answers, in Italian), “yes” (7 in Italian with different spelling such as “si”, “sì”, “siii” and “Si!”), “yes (9 in English, with different spellings such as “yeeeeees”, “yess”, “yep” and “yup”), and various expressions of agreement (“let’s do it”, “absolutely yes ahah”, “deal”), another question (“us too?”), a comment (“I’m scared”). The lecturer read out the answers and provided *Feedback* to all the students’ responses by reading them aloud from the chat and commenting on them. More specifically, the feedback given to the RS_II_1A_S2’s response (“shall we have a mix”?) is negative: the lecturers addressed it three times expressing his disapproval for the student’s suggestion. While the lecturer was starting a new topic, the student felt the need to express himself better by typing a new message in the chat (# (37) // RS_II_1A_S2 (by a mix) I mean, when you think something is difficult to understand you can translate it [9:24]), but he received no feedback.

Initiation B was started by the lecturer’s question, which did not receive a *Response*, so the lecturer showed a video and then provided himself the answer both verbally and by typing it in the chat. The sequence was ended by the lecturer who provided *feedback* to Initiation B by giving the answer verbally and typing in the chat. This can be considered an example of *mode-switching*, which shows how written and oral mode can be intertwined and enrich each other in computer-mediated communication as previous studies have shown (Sindoni 2011, 2012, 2020).

Discussion and concluding remarks:

Regarding the first research question (what patterns are shown in interactions occurring in emergency video-mediated EFL classes?), this study shows that EFL classes are characterized by patterns of interaction typical of classroom discourse, namely *IRF*. By analyzing data collected during the participant observation of an EFL emergency class, the researcher could investigate interactions from both the lecturer and the student perspective.

The interactional sequence described in the previous section shows that, although interaction in ERE was challenging, both lecturers and students were able to adapt to the new setting and to interact. Despite the unusual and trying circumstances, the lecturer was able to interact with the students by initiating a conversation, collecting their responses and providing feedback. The students, in turn, could ask questions, respond and comment. Therefore, even if interactivity remains an issue of concern for online classes, and even more for ERE classes, this case study shows that the new setting does not hinder conversation per se, but it provides interlocutors with various opportunities to interact. For example, as shown in studies on video-mediated communication, the alternation of spoken and written interactional turns, namely mode-switching, (Sindoni 2011, 2012, 2020), allows the lecturer to rely on an additional tool to explain contents and help students understand, which by the way is not available in face-to-face classes.

Even if it cannot be argued that IRF and mode-switching are typical only of ERE settings, this paper aims to raise awareness on opportunities for interaction in online classes. Provided that lecturers are familiar with the available tools, they could be as interactive as in face-to-face classes.

Concerning the second research question (what opportunities and challenges characterize emergency online interactions?), this paper shows that video-mediated communication offers more opportunities for the students to interact and have feedback if compared to face-to-face lessons. *Initiation A*, for example, received 32 responses, which the lecturer was able to address with the help of the chat. Even if the lecturer had to select the responses to deal with in the feedback, he was able to synthesize them by mentioning the answer “yup”, which was a way to give indirect feedback to the other students who had posted informal comments. Moreover, he was able to single out two questions (“shall we have a mix?” and “us too?”) and provide feedback.

These preliminary study outcomes are in line with other studies on ERE education, which show that computer-mediated classroom discourse can increase students’ participation and interactivity (Luporini, 2020): the opportunity to simultaneously elicit answers from various students would not usually be possible in normal classroom circumstances, where students must wait for their turn or are reluctant to interrupt the lesson. Moreover, in F-to-F classes, students cannot talk at the same time (to give answers, for example)

which can result in one or more students declining to respond (time constraints would not allow all students to take turns and more confident students may dominate).

Furthermore, the chat serves also as an additional tool for “chalk talk”: in video-mediated communication, the lecturer can type keywords or interactive links either on the interactive whiteboard embedded in the tool or in the chat window. As the excerpt in the previous section shows, the possibility of *mode-switching* displays that interlocutors can rely on more channels to express their communicative needs. Therefore, the chat increases the options also for the lecturer to give feedback and communicate more effectively with his students.

Regarding the opportunities provided by video-mediated communication, the excerpt shows that creative strategies were adopted to compensate for distance and lack of non-verbal elements typical of face-to-face interactions such as facial expressions or tones of voice. Even though through video-conferencing the interlocutors can see each other, the students decided to keep their cameras off, but they typed in the chat messages and disregarded on purpose conformist spelling, added punctuation, used informal expressions (“deal”, “yup”). This is in line with studies on ERE which highlight an increased level of informality of online classes, where lecturers and students strive to overcome the barriers to distance (Luporini, 2020).

However, video-mediated communication poses some challenges. Apart from connection problems, which are not dealt with in this study, this kind of instructional setting requires the lecturers to juggle many tasks at once. Not only they have to carry on with the lesson, but they must read the chat and meaningfully integrate the interventions in the lessons, which can prove to be a tough task. First, it is not always an easy task because, while sharing the screen, it is not effortless to keep track of the posts in the chat. To read them properly, the lecturer has to stop the sharing and address them, which can be time-consuming and demanding, as the lecturer may feel compelled to read out all the answers.

Second, due to the increased interactivity of students, the lecturer has to manage many comments or questions from the chat, which appear uncontrollably one after another. Moreover, messages in the chat are linear and their order of appearance is caused by the fact that messages are posted in the order received by the system, without regard for what they are responding to (Herring, 1999). So, the lecturer must interpret and select them, and this requires familiarity and confidence with the tool. The lecturer who taught the class observed for this study seemed at ease during the lesson, but it may not have been the case for all the lecturers who had to suddenly become familiar with video-conferencing tools during the pandemic.

By the way, video-mediated interaction in ERE classes proved to be challenging also from the researcher's point of view in many ways. For example, keeping track of the several posts in the chat actions required a great effort to avoid overlooking data or misinterpreting messages, which is an additional possible limitation of participant observation. At the same time, the chat was a reliable source of important information for the researcher, such as the interlocutor's name and the timing, which facilitated the interpretation and analysis of data. Moreover, the researcher could experience the student perspective as she could rely on the same interactional possibilities as the other attendees. Nonetheless, some important elements may have been overlooked, such as the private exchanges among students or with the lecturer which might have been sent in the chat privately and could not be seen by the other attendees. This information could have been accessed by asking the students' and the lecturer to take screenshots of their screens and chats, but this option was ruled out because it would have affected spontaneous interaction.

Another possible limitation of this study is the size of the data set: this case study is limited to the observation of one class and its outcomes cannot be generalized, therefore its aim is to provide preliminary observations, which could pave the way for more extensive studies. Furthermore, being one of the introductory lessons the high number of students' intervention could be affected by the need for information on the course, whereas the following lessons might have been less interactive, and the results of a wider study might be different.

Even so, despite its limitations and possible shortcomings, this article shows that in video-mediated classroom discourse interlocutors can rely on affordances, such as the chat, which could facilitate and even increase interaction in line with previous studies on computer-mediated and video-mediated communication. Given that ERE is a massive phenomenon and for the first time almost every lecturer and student experienced video-mediated communication, further studies on pedagogical implications of this setting might benefit from larger datasets and widespread interest in the topic. Possible areas of research could be the integration of video-mediated communication in hybrid teaching (in-person streamed classes), its consequences on cognition and the learning process, its relevance in increasing the student talk time in EFL classes, alternation of native language and foreign language in EFL classes, and possible improvements of the available tools to make them more user- friendly.

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