

Agreeing to disagree: ‘doing disagreement’ in assessed oral L2 interactions

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Abstract

While disagreements are often considered dispreferred choices and potentially face-threatening acts due to their oppositional nature, this perception does not adequately reflect the importance of disagreeing for many types of interaction, such as problem-solving and decision-making. Developing ability in performing this speech act therefore becomes relevant for learners of an L2 in order to show achievements in such general language learning targets as expressing and defending opinions and arguments, as well as negotiating consensual decisions.

This paper presents a sequential analysis of disagreements in assessed interactions of advanced German-speaking learners of English, observed in three different exam formats, i.e. teacher-led interview, role play with teacher and paired student interaction. Overall, 33 disagreement episodes were identified in 18 oral exams. Findings show that the choice of examination format constrains range and type of disagreement trajectory enacted by the learners, highlighting the influence of minor contextual differences. Moreover, analyses of these exams suggest that linguistic alignment can and does co-exist with oppositional talk, supporting the notion that the purpose of achieving a successful joint performance of L2 interaction carries weight even when there is disagreement on a content level.

Keywords: classroom discourse, L2 interactions, spoken language assessment, English as a Foreign Language, disagreement

1. Introduction

Being able to converse and interact in the target language is the key aim of many language learners. In the wake of the communicative turn in language teaching, oral proficiency has become prominent in the classroom, which increasingly is expected to be an ‘oral space’. While a vibrant body of research

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has dramatically advanced our understanding of classroom discourse in this ‘oral space’ (see e.g., Johnson 1995; Nunan 1989; Seedhouse 2004; Walsh 2006, 2011; Young 2009), the precise conceptualisation of second language (L2) interactional competence, arguably the target for L2 learners, is still being debated (Chalhoub-Deville 2003). This has affected language testing practice, and although the growing body of research into oral language testing in general (see e.g., Fulcher 2003, Fulcher & Davidson 2010; Taylor 2011) and of discourse analyses of specific standardised oral testing formats (see e.g., Brown 2005; Galaczi 2008, Johnson 2001, Seedhouse & Egbert 2006) has led to a good understanding of the standardised test formats like IELTS, comparatively little attention has been placed on the less structured assessment practices within school classrooms across continental Europe. These practices are often characterised by a high level of similarity to non-assessed classroom discourse, by being teacher-administered and by generally little concern for overtly addressing issues of reliability and validity¹. Nevertheless, the results of these exams have very real effects on test-takers in terms of career and study options and so would seem to merit more focused research attention.

With regard to identifying aspects of the potential L2 target, consideration of both classroom practice and achievement aims for learners shows that, among many other factors, the ability to debate issues of both a personal and abstract nature, reach consensual decisions and to solve problems are paramount. This can also be seen in the descriptors of level B2 (spoken interaction) within the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as “can take an active part in discussion [...] accounting for and sustaining [own] views”.² Current research into the language used for decision-making and problem solving has highlighted the role of disagreements as a “sine qua non” within these speech activities (Angiouri & Locher 2012), challenging earlier research that viewed the act of disagreeing as a face threatening act (FTA) in need of appropriate politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987; Heritage 1989) or as the dispreferred choice in the relevant adjacency pair (Pomerantz 1984; Sacks 1987).

¹ See Alderson & Szollas (2000) and Alderson et al.’s (2000) descriptions of the Hungarian pre-reform English school exams for one of the very few descriptions of this type of classroom-based examination

² See http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_en.pdf for a complete list of descriptors

This points towards the need, implicitly also for L2 learners, of achieving assessable competence in ‘doing disagreeing’. Extant research on disagreements in educational settings has so far focused on describing their form and function within general classroom discourse (see e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Salsbury 2004; Hellermann 2009; Fujimoto 2010; Pekarek-Doehler & Pochon-Berger 2011) and has shown the potential of disagreements to aid learners in performing language learning tasks and in processing new information. However, one area that seems worthy of more research attention is the space given to disagreements in assessed classroom discourse. Of special interest here is gaining more insights into how this aspect of spoken L2 competence is performed in assessment contexts and, importantly, what potential is created for learners to perform this speech act given the inherent power differential between teachers and learners in a typical school classroom.

This paper presents a sequential analysis of disagreements in oral examination of advanced German-speaking learners of English. Through this, it explores the issues related to contextual influences on disagreements and shows implications for language teaching and assessment with regard to the potential openings offered to learners to display their ability in performing this speech act.

2. Disagreements in interaction

The concept of ‘disagreement’ covers a range of speech acts “at the antipode of agreement” (Angouri & Locher 2012, 1549) and shows overlap with related concepts, such as argumentation, argument talk, conflict talk, dispute, oppositional talk/exchange, verbal arguing (Fujimoto 2010, Georgakopoulou 2001; Muntigl & Turnbull 1998; Sharma 2012). For the purposes of this paper, disagreement or ‘doing disagreeing’ will be defined as any episode in talk-in-interaction where opposition is expressed, starting sequentially from the statement that is the source of the disagreement up until the resolution, often implicitly managed by participants moving on to a new activity or topic. Frequently, the turn(s) between the statement causing the disagreement and the resolution are the clearest expressions of opposition, here called the ‘dissenting turn(s)’.³ Overlaps between arguments and disagreements as well as between repair and disagreements inevitably remain.

³ see Muntigl & Turnbull, 1998, 226-7 on the three-turn structure of arguments

Disagreements are often considered “socially disruptive” (Georgakopoulou & Patrona 2000, 323) and hence in need of some form of mitigation. Within politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987), this mitigation is conceptualised as suitable politeness strategies to address the potential threat to the hearer’s positive face (i.e. the wish to be approved of, liked, ratified, etc. by others). Conversation analytic work, however, views these mitigations as an effect of the status of disagreements as dispreferred, i.e. less expected and desired, second pair parts of adjacency pairs, with agreements being the preferred response (Pomerantz 1984, see also Cheng & Tsui 2009, Georgakopoulou & Patrona 2000, Georgakopoulou 2001). As far as form is concerned, Pomerantz (1984) describes these mitigations as ‘weak disagreements’, which typically include agreement components of the ‘yes-but’ type and may list exceptions or give specifications and qualifications. The status of disagreements as dispreferred is additionally seen as supported by them being delayed (both within and across turns), as well as frequently containing hedges or hesitation markers, requests for clarification and questioning repeats. (see also Bardovi-Harlig & Salsbury 2004)

Later research, however, has challenged this implicit equation of all disagreements with face-threatening acts and dispreferred choices by drawing on evidence from a variety of sources. Firstly, in informal conversations, unmitigated disagreements appear to be evidence of easy and trusting relationships within family or friends and signs of intimacy without face-aggravating effects (Georgakopoulou 2001; Goodwin 1983, 1990; Schiffrin 1984). Secondly, in certain forms of institutional talk, disagreements are expected and hence the preferred, rather than dispreferred, choice, e.g. in legal court discourse (Atkinson & Drew 1979) and TV interviews (Greatbatch 1992). In fact, disagreements might even be evaluated as an inherent feature of the speech activity, e.g. in decision-making, business and academic negotiations and problem-solving (Angouri & Bargiela-Chiappini 2011, Gray 2001, Sharma 2012). These findings suggest that disagreements cannot be seen as “a priori negative acts” (Angouri & Locher 2012, 1551) and indeed in order to arrive at an informed understanding of their disagreements, an analysis of their positioning within “wider discourses” (Angouri & Locher 2012, 1550) is vital .

In an attempt to establish a typology of disagreements, Muntigl & Turnbull (1998, 229-233) identified four distinct types. The first of these, *counterclaim*, clearly overlaps with weak disagreements in Pomerantz' terms, that is to say, it is generally accompanied by diverse mitigating features and often contains an agreement element. Secondly, there are *irrelevancy claims*, where a speaker opposes a preceding turn by claiming it is not relevant to the discussion, e.g. 'So what' or 'You're straying off topic'. The third type is a *challenge*, typically formulated as a question and implying that the preceding speaker does not have sufficient evidence for their claim. Finally, disagreements may take the form of a *contradiction*, where usually the preceding statement is negated (or if it already is a negative statement, shows positive markers, like 'yes' or 'yeah'), e.g. 'C: He thinks you guys hate him M: I don't hate him'⁴. In addition, combined patterns over a number of turns were observed, usually consisting of contradiction and counterclaim. If the disagreements happen within multiparty interactions, more complex patterns emerge, largely connected to the possibility of speakers forming 'teams' around specific standpoints (Kangasharju 1996, 2002). Considerable research within the L1, then, suggests that rather than simply being face-threatening acts to be mitigated, disagreements are complex and "interactionally dense moments" (Bardovi-Harlig & Salsbury, 2004, 210). Also, disagreements differ in terms of form and function depending on the context in which they occur.

Research on L2 disagreements has generally taken the form of either analysing developmental patterns in language learners or of describing disagreement patterns in one specific activity. Within the first group, Bardovi-Harlig & Salsbury (2004) investigated the disagreement practices of 10 ESL learners who interacted with both native and non-native speakers of English over a period of an academic year. Learners started the year by using strong disagreements (Pomerantz 1984), i.e. without agreeing elements, though possibly with hedges. Later in the year, disagreements become more elaborated, usually in the following forms: firstly, increasing the amount of talk in the dissenting turn, secondly, including agreement elements ('yes-but' disagreements), thirdly, postponing the disagreement to a later position within one turn, and finally, using a multiple turn structure to delay and potentially avoid disagreement.

We might note in this example that disagreeing appears to be the preferred choice. Similarly, disagreements are preferred in response to self-denigratory remarks (e.g. 'I'm fat' 'No, you're not') pointing again to the difficulty of assuming disagreements to be generally dispreferred.

However, while Bardovi-Harlig & Salsbury propose this as a fairly clear developmental pattern, Hellermann (2009) suggests in his study of one adult ESL student that the use of a direct, unmitigated disagreement is highly context-sensitive. He argues that this pattern might not be an indication of an early stage of learning, but rather of specific norms in a classroom community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991), where direct disagreements, also in form of corrections, may be unmarked. Pekarek-Doehler and Pochon-Berger (2011) analysed disagreement patterns among lower intermediate and advanced learners of French in Swiss school-contexts. Their findings show systematic differences in that the advanced learners produce more disagreements of the ‘yes-but’ type, show more regular use of hedges and discursive elaborations (e.g. explanations, exemplification), show evidence of format-tying, i.e. matching their own syntax and lexicon to that of their interlocutor, and produce dissenting turns both immediately following the source of disagreement and more distanced from it. (cf. Pekarek-Doehler & Pochon-Berger, 2011, Table 9.2) The authors themselves pose the question whether these systematic differences can be taken as evidence of learning or whether they merely reflect diverse communicative cultures in the two levels of schooling. The latter explanation would support the context-sensitive nature of disagreement, especially given the age-difference in learners in the two groups and also the differing complexity of topics handled. However, by using L1 data of disagreements from the lower level the authors provide evidence that the changes in L2 patterns reflect a move towards L1 practice and so an interactional development (ibid., 236-8).

Fujimoto’s (2010) analysis of small group discussion of Japanese beginner learners of English provides supportive evidence of the ways in which disagreements support discussion and debate in educational contexts. Thus, disagreeing appears not to be constructed as disruptive or face-threatening by the learners, but rather as a means of engaging with the pedagogical focus of developing more sophisticated arguments. Additionally, Fujimoto’s sequential analyses of the disagreements performed by the learners in this study highlight how the provision of responses to original assessments (whether agreement or disagreement) by each of the learners helped them to collaboratively construct opinions and argumentations beyond the abilities of the individual. This is in line with findings by Pekarek-Doehler and Pochon-Berger (2011) and Sharma (2012), who suggest that ‘doing disagreeing’ supports learners in the development of more sophisticated arguments than they might have achieved otherwise.

In addition to these studies on entire episodes of L2 disagreements, Sharma (2012, 2013) provides insights into specific elements of disagreements. Sharma's (2012) focus within a study of peer-interactions in collaborative writing tasks lies on the closing of disagreements, which "poses regular interactional problems for students" (Sharma 2012, 5). He shows how 'conceding' in group discussions, i.e. accepting the position maintained by another interactant, can be accomplished via three possible trajectories. These are, firstly, through a change in one participant's epistemic stance after having been given further information and accepting the related point of view, secondly, as a result of submitting to the views held by several peers and expressed by these through peer-alliances (see also Kangasharju 2002) and, finally, through accepting an alternative view. In general, these data show how closing disagreements is often a step-wise process involving the negotiation of diverse stances in order to arrive at a position shared by all interlocutors. This consensual resolution seems vital for the success of the collaborative task at hand.⁵ Sharma's (2013) study on the same data set focuses on the role of the teacher in resolving disagreements and recognises two patterns, viz. solicited and unsolicited teacher intervention. What seems of relevance to the study at hand is the fact that the teachers could only resolve disagreements through their accepted status as having superior knowledge. This asymmetry of knowledge gives interactional power (and responsibility) to the teacher, who can decide whether, when and to intervene in a group task; actions with clear pedagogical effects. (ibid, 12). These findings highlight the influence on the teacher's role onto classroom discourse patterns due to the power differential between pupils and teachers. This is well-described in the literature (see, e.g. Cazden 2000, Christie 2002, Seedhouse 2004, Walsh 2006, 2011), but the importance of the teacher holding epistemic primacy, i.e. having the relative authority of knowledge (Stivers et al. 2011, 9), cannot be neglected in terms of the teacher's rights both to disagree with a student and for themselves not to be disagreed with.

Of further relevance to an analysis of disagreements is their relationship to two types of co-operation, i.e. of alignment vs. affiliation. The former has been identified as encompassing the structural and the latter the affective level of co-operation (Stivers 2008, Stivers et al. 2011, 20). In general, speakers are

⁵ Although not directly focused on disagreements, Waring (2001, 2005) offers insights how students in peer to peer group discussions position themselves and others as experts in order to support (or reject) specific arguments.

considered to show a preference for both types of co-operation (ibid, 21), and there is the expectation that these two types co-occur. With regard to disagreements, this would indicate that disalignment and disaffiliation are expected in line with the oppositional stance taken and this assumption seems borne out in research by Kangasharju (2002) and Sharma (2012). Their findings suggest that alignment in multi-party disagreements occurs between those interlocutors in agreement rather than between those in disagreement within group discussions.

To summarise, current research on disagreements highlights their pervasiveness in many discursive practices, such as negotiations, and the need to consider their status as face-threatening or dispreferred in light of their specific context of occurrence. In terms of co-operation, the oppositional nature of disagreements seems to suggest a combination of disalignment and disaffiliation (Kangasharju 2002, Sharma 2012, Stivers et al. 2011). While various typologies of disagreements have been suggested, the four categories proposed by Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) seem to offer the most fine-grained diversification to date and hence has been adopted in this study. Previous research on disagreements in the L2 suggests that there are diverse patterns observable, depending both on developmental and on contextual factors. There are indications of disagreements being an integral part of classroom negotiations (e.g., Hellermann 2009, Pekarek-Doehler & Pochon Berger 2011), and of their benefit in challenging learners towards the production of longer and more complex language than could be achieved otherwise (e.g. Fujimoto 2010, Sharma 2012)

3. Data and Methodology

3.1 Educational background Austria

The study reported on here was conducted in Austria, where both general and vocational upper secondary schools finish with a high-stakes exam (*Matura*) granting access to universities. This involves examination of seven subjects in a mixture of oral and written formats, with English as the first foreign language typically constituting one of the examined subjects. As is common in many continental European settings, oral exams are frequent in all subjects, including scientific, technical and commercial subjects, and are administered by the class teachers. Ability to set and evaluate exams

is considered part of the professional expertise of teachers, and while movements towards both explicit assessor training and more standardised exams exist, these are still far from entering the mainstream. Pass grades in all subjects are required for university entry, and the actual grades obtained are important in career terms. Of all students involved in post-compulsory education, only between 18.9% and 22.17% (depending on specific school type) achieve a *Matura* (cf. Statistik Austria, 2012).

The official curricular aims are linked to the CEFR⁶ and follow communicative language teaching in its 'weak form' (Brumfit 1984) and the *Matura* specifies level B2 as its target. Each oral exam should last a maximum of 10 minutes, before which candidates have 10 minutes preparation time after they are given the exam tasks and may use very brief notes. Like all oral *Matura* exams, English is examined by a panel of all teachers of a particular class, the head teacher of the school and an external chair who may also ask questions.

3.2. Data

The data were collected at four schools in two Austrian provinces in the lead-up to the oral exams in May and June 2009 and 2010. During a period of about three weeks immediately prior to the oral exams, pupils can voluntarily take part in group preparatory sessions with the teachers of their chosen exam subjects. These sessions are viewed by all participants as providing a supportive environment of exam preparation and of discussion of pertinent topics with an overt relaxation of some school rules, e.g. obligatory and punctual attendance.

Unfortunately, the school authorities did not grant permission to record the actual oral exams, or to video-record even the practice exams. Thus, audio-recordings were accompanied by field notes of the preparatory sessions of five language classes and around 20 hours of data collected. The focus of this paper lies on sequences in these sessions involving 'mock exams', where teachers overtly imitate the actual exam format, i.e. by asking students individually to take a seat at the front, setting questions according to exam regulations and timing the performance. Reflecting current practice in Austria, three diverse exam formats were used, i.e. teacher-led interview, role play and paired student

⁶ These curricula can be viewed on http://www.bmukk.gv.at/schulen/bw/bbs/Berufsbildende_Schulen_H1745.xml and http://www.bmukk.gv.at/medienpool/11854/lp_ahs_os_lebende_fs.pdf

interaction. For this paper, the analysis focuses on a data set of 6 paired exams, 6 role plays and 6 teacher-led interviews, involving 24 students aged between 17 and 20. These mock exams typically take place in the few days before the actual exam, and mirror this as closely as possible. For paired student exams, this includes the choice of partner. Three male and two female teachers conducted such mock exams, identified by abbreviations for ‘Teacher-Male-Number’, i.e. TM1, TM2, etc., and ‘Teacher-Female-Number’, i.e. TF1, TF2, etc., respectively. Students are identified by the following abbreviations, SF1, SF2, etc. for ‘Student-Female-Number’ and SM1, SM2, etc. for ‘Student-Male-Number’. All students and teachers spoke German as their L1.

3.3. Methods of Analysis

The analytic methods employed here take into account the overarching frame of classroom discourse and are informed by the two fields most heavily engaged with the phenomenon of disagreements, i.e. conversation analysis and pragmatics. The influence of conversation analysis can be seen in the value attached to fine-grained, sequential analyses, whereas the influence of pragmatics is clear in the importance given to addressing issues of context and effect within specific interactions.

Within the collected data of about 20 hours of classroom discourse, sequences of individual mock-exams were identified and these transcribed in detail by the author (for conventions see Appendix). The transcripts were then imported into NVivo, where they were subsequently coded. This involved an iterative process that combined deductive and inductive elements (Miles & Huberman, 1994). While coding within specialised qualitative software is not, to my knowledge, used within conversation analysis, it supported the researcher by making a large and diverse data set searchable, importantly also in matrix queries. This allowed for executing searches for particular disagreement patterns within particular exam formats or for particular teachers or students. Through this, an identification of recurring or idiosyncratic features was supported and additional information on the sequential analyses in terms of establishing patterns across discursive practices provided. Codes were established for disagreement, repair, alignment and overlap and included codes for entire episodes as well as for individual turn classifications within these episodes. Thus, for instance, a specific disagreement episode was coded as such from the beginning of the utterance that caused the disagreement to the

resolution, with additional codes for the diverse phases (i.e. origin, dissent, resolution). As regards alignment, codes were established for other-completions, acceptance tokens, echoes.

4. Findings

Within the entire data set, 33 episodes were identified as signalling disagreement between two speakers. Disagreement episodes are defined as containing the utterance, which prompts the interactant to disagree, the dissenting turn(s) and the resolution, which might involve abandoning the disagreement and moving on to a new topic. The dissenting turn(s) are seen as the disagreement proper.

As distinct differences in the enactment of disagreement could be observed in the three assessment formats, the discussion will be structured according to these.

4.1 Disagreements in teacher-led interviews

Overall, the 13 observed disagreement episodes within interviews are characterised by teacher-produced dissenting turns. Resolutions are achieved by students quickly abandoning their original position and changing to align with the new proposition put forward by the teacher, who is generally constructed as the ‘knower’ in these interactions (see also Sharma, 2013).

The typical pattern of disagreements observed thus is the following

INSERT FIGURE 1

Turn B is teacher-produced, and of the 13 turns, 11 took the form of contradiction, and one each of counterclaim and challenge (Muntigl & Turnbull 1998). This challenges the notion that counterclaims are the default, at least for this examination format. In six instances, the contradictions include hesitation markers. Additionally, turn B is also characterised by elements of collaboration in the form

of agreement tokens on the part of the students, which then lead to a more formal assent on the students' part in Turn C.

In the extract 1, the exam topic relates to the conflicts between the pro-choice and pro-life camps in the US and the student (SM2) is explaining the religious foundations of the pro-life argument, with which he (and the teacher?) appears to disagree.

Extract 1. Life before birth

- 1 SM2: [so in my opinion] the main point is ahm for for the people
2 who are for >for the baby< or against the baby is (0.3) a:hm
3 is the baby alive (0.5) ↓I think that's that's the main
4 question (0.6)
5 TM1: mmh
6 SM2: because em religious people think that y-you can't eh you
7 can't kill a baby ehm (.) am it ehs against God's will
8 TM1: mmh
9 SM2: so:
10 TM1: well it certainly is alive (1.7)
11 SM2: eh sorry
12 TM1: eht it it certainly [IS]
13 SM2: [yes]
14 TM1: alive [I mean as]
15 SM2: [yes] (~~seit~~) the beginning of the (1.3) °~~befruchtung~~°.
trans yes since the beginning of the conception

This extract starts with the student's assertion that the main point in the debate on the morality and legality of abortion is whether the baby is alive (lines 3-4). Although in lines 5 and 8, the teacher's 'mmh' might be interpreted as supportive agreement markers, the teacher counters in line 10 with a disagreeing turn 'well, it certainly is alive', constituting a contradiction in the form of a strong

disagreement (Pomerantz 1984; Muntigl & Turnbull 1998). We can notice that despite the lack of a mitigating agreeing element, the statement is slightly delayed and hedged with the term 'well'. Nevertheless, the stress on the term 'certainly' highlights disagreement taken in this turn to the original student statement.

This teacher turn constitutes a trouble source in the interaction, resulting in a repair initiation on the part of the student after a noticeable pause of 1.7 seconds. On the completion of the repair on the part of the teacher in lines 12 and 14, i.e. once the student has understood the teacher's point, we see that the student appears to immediately take on board the teacher's proposition with two clear affirmatives in lines 13 and 15 an overt agreement with the teacher in 'yes [since] the beginning of the [conception]'. What we see here, then, is that strongly opposing views, i.e. 'X is the main unresolved question' vs. 'X is a certainty', are reconciled to conform to the teacher's view, constructed as the correct one. This is in line with viewing the teacher as having 'epistemic primacy' (Stivers et al. 2011, 9) on this question, both in terms of how accurately the pro-life vs. pro-choice debate is being presented by the student, and importantly also on the underlying moral question regarding the unborn foetus' rights. Thus, the potential of the disagreement to function as a starting point for further negotiation is not followed through, and indeed it would be hard for the student to argue against the teacher's utterance in line 10. Arguably, this pattern is in line with more general patterns of pedagogical repair or correction.

The pattern of students backtracking on their original statement which prompted the teacher's disagreement is pervasive in these interviews. In nine of the disagreement episodes in this exam format, the students took the teacher's view explicitly on board, with lexical agreement tokens like 'yes', 'yeah', 'okay', and in three more they did so implicitly by abandoning their original point. There is only one exception to assent, where the student reacts to her teacher's dissenting turn by a disagreement, which leads to a clarification of the student's position. In the sample, the most frequent teacher disagreement format is that of a contradiction, followed by challenges and with only two examples of counterclaim (Muntigl & Turnbull 1998).

The frame of these interactions is quite clearly established with the teacher as the bearer of the correct view or knowledge and hence having both epistemic access and epistemic primacy (Stivers et al. 2011,

9). As a result of this power differential, the enacted pattern resembles correction practices in classrooms (Seedhouse 2004, ch. 4). Especially on the part of the students, the reaction to disagreements is one of assent, rather than further dissent. Thus, they take on board the teacher's point of view immediately in what seems to be a strategy of minimising the disagreement. This change in the students is frequently accompanied by clear elements of linguistic alignment, such as agreement tokens or overlapping completions.

4.2. Disagreements in role plays

In the six role play mock exams altogether 9 disagreement episodes were observed, with ranges from 0 to 4 per exam. Only teacher TM2 used role plays in assessment, which are the default choice in most vocational upper secondary schools. The roles assigned in these tasks are taken from the business world, focusing on fashion and design in line with the specialisation of that specific school. While observation showed role plays to be frequent in this school's teaching practice, they usually involve only students, and we might argue that in this exam format, the relationship between the two speakers changes a little. Thus, while the overarching frame remains that of teacher and student in an exam-like setting, speakers also enact their assigned roles, which usually casts both of them in professional roles (e.g. head of marketing for the student and CEO for the teacher). Even though these roles never put the student in a hierarchically higher role than the teacher's role, a greater equality of roles was simulated than in a regular teacher-student encounter.

The pattern of disagreements is more complex than the typical one in the interviews, with two distinct dissenting turns, but one feature in common is that the disagreements were usually initiated by the teacher, i.e. TM2 produced the first dissenting turn.

Insert Figure 2

Both turn B and C are characterised by a variety of disagreement formats, with all but the irrelevancy claim represented. Counterclaim (also in the variant counterclaim plus challenge) is the most frequent

teacher-produced dissenting turn, and counterclaim and contradiction equally are the most prominent student-produced dissenting turns.

Extract 2. Anorexia as advertising - addressing a taboo or making money off illness?

⁷ This campaign (see http://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/nolita_isabelle_caro_1 for the billboard posters) caused a major stir at Milan's Fashion week in 2007. The model, Isabelle Caro, has since passed away as a result of anorexia.

14 (.) oversize a:nd so they want to say that ehm
anorexia
15 isn't healthy and they made ehm an statement that
 (.)
16 e:hm anorexia \$isn't good\$ and the people have to
eat
17 more and so the people went eh go to noila ehm (.)
18 nolita and buy the oversize clothes ha ha
19 TM2: I mean yeah they they eventually they they like to
 ha
20 (.) you know people
21 SF2: so
22 TM2: buy their products=
23 SF2: =yes (.) ha
24 TM2: but do you think that's legitimate to (.)on the one
25 hand eh actually draw attention to the company by eh
 by
26 using those controversial topics by using those
27 controversial photographs which actually ehm which
 have
28 very serious background or which have a very serious
29 ehm issue
30 SF2: yes
31 TM2: and do you think that's legitimate
32 SF2 well (.) i think it's (.) oKAY but (1.2) e:hm (1.8)
33 well (.) it's a strange way ha ha=
34 TM2: =hm
35 SF2: but (1.7)
36 TM2: why is it strange for you

Teacher Dissenting Turn (Challenge)

B2:

Student revises A

D:

Classroom Discourse

37 SF2: now because they e:hm they use this strange way to
(.)
38 ehm to: to handle with this topic (5.6)
39 °oh Gott°
Trans oh God

SF2 starts with a statement (lines 1-3) on the positive effects of challenging the taboo surrounding eating disorders by using an advertising campaign featuring an anorexic model. This is followed first by a response token by TM2 (line 4), and then closed with an ‘and yes’ (line 5) by SF2. The dissenting turn by TM2, consisting of a counterclaim and a challenge, introduces the notion of a potential contradiction or, indeed, moral dilemma, i.e. using important issues (and vulnerable individuals) for commercial purposes. In line 6, and then again in line 9-11, the actual challenge is formulated (‘do you think that’s the right way’), bracketing the counterclaim that this campaign is not raising awareness, but actually commercial in interest. Lines 6-11, as well as later lines 24-29, resemble ‘doing teaching’ in that TM2 is trying to lead SF2 towards an understanding of the underlying issues (see also Sandlund & Sundqvist 2013). SF2, however, does not engage with the proposed moral dilemma, but maintains her original position by using a contradiction. This is preceded by a hedge, ‘well’, and a 1.7 second pause, indicating possibly either a consideration of the dilemma or arguably marking a more general disinclination to align with the teacher. We can see how the SF2’s original statement (arguing that the campaign is positive, because it raises awareness of anorexia) is maintained after the first disagreement, which takes the form of a counterclaim plus challenge by the teacher. The student continues to argue that, as Nolita sells oversize clothes, the overall message of the campaign is a positive one. The student SF2’s contradiction starts with her statement that ‘I think that it is a good idea’ (lines 12) with emphasis on the verb, showing a disalignment and disaffiliation with the teacher. In lines 13-18 SF2 adds a further explanation, thus showing her ability to develop her argument through engaging with dissent. In lines 19-29 TM2 re-iterates his earlier by essentially repeating the disagreeing challenge. In lines 19-20 and 22, TM2 appears to rephrase the earlier ‘commercial campaign’ (line 9) as ‘they like to ha (.) you know people buy their products’. SF2’s sequence-initial ‘so’ (line 21) could arguably be seen as an attempt to take the turn and continue with her earlier

interactional ‘project’ (Bolden 2009), thus continuing to not engage with TM2’s dissent. SF2’s latched agreement token and laughter particle (line 23) indicate a shift towards an alignment with the teacher. This is followed by TM2’s extended presentation of the moral dilemma presented by Nolita’s advertising campaign (lines 24-29), and in line 30, SF2 produces an agreement token, a sign of continued alignment, although it appears highly doubtful that this is also a sign of affiliation. .

After the second challenge by the teacher along the lines of making money through arguably exploiting vulnerable persons (lines 24-29), the student backtracks on her original argument, and uses hedges, such a ‘well, I think it’s okay’, and also more ambivalent evaluations, like ‘strange’ (lines 32-33), all in the frame of a counterclaim. We can notice that in the last lines of this extract, i.e. 37-38, the student is becoming less able to react to the disagreement challenges and implicit requests for a clearer line of argumentation and an engagement with the moral dilemma suggested by TM2. This is indicated in the marked 5.7 second gap in line 38 and the softly spoken German ‘oh Gott’ in line 39. Although the teacher’s turns take the form of challenges (Muntigl & Turnbull 1998) and so are typically formulated as questions (see lines 6-11 and 24-29), we also find frequent hedges like ‘I mean’ (line 19). Interestingly, despite the challenge format and the fact that the content of the disagreement appears to be quite fundamental between the two speakers, both statement A and the teacher’s second dissenting turn B2 show some elements of alignment in the form of response tokens by the other speaker (lines 4, 23, 30, 34). This does seem to suggest that alignment and affiliation do not necessarily co-occur in these patterns.

Within the role play format, therefore, a distinctly different disagreement trajectory emerges compared to the interview format. Firstly, there is a clear overall pattern with two dissenting turns (Fig. 2), with at least one by the teacher and one by the student, and a greater variety of formats enacted. Thus, even though it is still typically the teacher who initiates disagreements, students perform nearly as many dissenting turns and so demonstrate their ability to do so. This indicates that the precise exam format encourages diverse disagreement patterns, with those described for role plays enabling students to additionally develop their point of view more accurately. Thus, in contrast to their *prima facie* unsupportive nature, disagreements in this format can be considered a supportive measure in

facilitating students' production of a maximally coherent argument. It remains apparent that the disagreements as such are still resolved rather quickly and speakers align with each other through supportive response tokens while disagreeing. This suggests, firstly, that the generally supportive role of the teacher is maintained throughout these disagreements and secondly, that for student interlocutors resolving these disagreements quickly and by changing their original position is arguably a response to the power differential between students and their (assessing) teacher.

4.3. Disagreements in paired exams

In the paired exam format, two students were typically given tasks related to having to prepare a presentation for an audience on a particular topic and jointly deciding the content and structure of this presentation. In many ways, this format reflects Austrian EFL classroom practice the most, where pair and group work are frequent. Students are allowed to choose their partners in these exams. The knowledge that each partner has to speak for roughly 50% of the time makes the floor inherently contested; however, the exams were characterised by a lot of overt linguistic collaboration, in the form of other-completions, response tokens and applying 'let-it-pass' (Firth 1996) to some potential problem sources.

Clearly, all disagreements are produced by the students in this format. Although with only 10 disagreement episodes, the total is lowest compared to the other formats, there seem to be two slightly distinct patterns of enacting disagreements. These are partly related to the type of proposition prompting the dissent. If the origin of the disagreement is factual, the pattern enacted resembles that of teacher-led interviews with a contradiction as Turn B and a quick resolution, as shown in extract 3. The task for this paired exam was for the two students to prepare a presentation on the Austrian educational system for a UK partner school. They students discuss the differences in examination procedures and here focus on the compulsory subjects for school-leaving exams, which - possibly due to the imminent nature of their own exams - they consider to make the overall exam experience harder for Austrian than British pupils, as three quite diverse subjects (German, Maths and the first foreign language) are compulsory.

INSERT FIGURE 3

Extract 3: The subjects in the final exams

- 1 SF11: we have to take English German Math
2 SF12: well we don't have to take English
3 SF11: oh English no but German and Math (.) yeah and a
4 language yeah

Extract 3 shows clearly the similarity between some types of disagreement and general repair sequences, and highlights the difficulties of clear distinctions between various types of oppositional talk (see section 2). The main reason for still viewing this episode as a disagreement is that both SF11 and SF12 are aware of the exam regulations and indeed SF11, as she clarifies in lines 3 and 4, is correct in saying school-leaving exams have to be taken in the first foreign language taught, which for the vast majority of schools in Austria, including the site of the recording, is English.

The second pattern observed here is very similar, but characterised by a large element of overt linguistic alignment between turns B and C. This suggests that while there is a *prima facie* disagreement, the overall frame is one of joint responsibility. Additionally, turn B is most typically a counterclaim, with few instances of challenge or contradiction.

INSERT FIGURE 4

Extract 4 below exemplifies this pattern and is taken from a mock exam, in which students were asked to prepare a presentation on working life with a focus on diverse types of employment, working conditions and unemployment. In Extract 4, the students are discussing their perception of differences between diverse types of redundancies. A relevant piece of background information is that in Austria there are a number of so-called 'protected workshops', where severely handicapped persons produce goods under clear supervision, in addition to charities that sell cards and calendars produced by handicapped persons. SF13's reference to a calendar in line 18 relates to these.

Extract 4: Unwilling or unable to work?

Classroom Discourse

- 1 SF14: yeah ehm I think we should focus on that point
2 because the number of ehm people who don't work
3 ehm rises every day in Austria (.) and I think
4 ehm we should differ between people who don't
5 want to work because they are lazy or >I don't
6 know<=
7 SF13: =okay yes
8 SF14: and people who CAN't work=
9 SF13: =but they want to
10 SF14: yeah for example disabled people or I don't
11 know (ill people)
12 SF13: yes but I think especially in Austria there are
13 many possibilities now for disabled [people to
14 work]
15 SF14: [yeah
16 for sure]
17 SF13: and you also ehm for example I have a
18 calendar at home [paintings from xxx]
19 SF14: [xxx] ha ha ha
20 SF13: yeah ha ha ha
21 SF14: yeah ((clears throat))ehm yeah we should also
22 include this in our presentation
23 SF13: okay [and also]
24 SF14: [do you agree]

In lines 1-11, SF14 builds up her argument that there are two types of unemployed persons, those unwilling and those unable to work. This happens first in line 1-6 with the introduction of 'lazy' unemployed, which is acknowledged with latched agreement markers by SF13 in line 7. In line 8, SF14 contrasts this with unemployed persons due to an inability to work using an emphatic 'can't' to strengthen the contrast to the previously described 'lazy' unemployed. Line 9 presents a latched

collaborate completion by SF13, indicating alignment. SF14 completes her statement of opinion in lines 10 and 11 by giving examples. This statement of opinion is followed by a counterclaim by SF13 in lines 12-18, centring on the employment possibilities for disabled people. It is interesting to note that this disagreement indicates clear disaffiliation, arguably unexpected in light of the preceding alignment features. SF14 produces agreement tokens of ‘yeah for sure’ in lines 15, which seems to indicate alignment, now from SF14 towards SF13. SF13 clarifies her counterclaim with further examples of work produced by disabled people (lines 17-18). In line 21, the student SF14 acknowledges with ‘yeah’ the counterclaim made by SF13, but there is no return to SF14’s original statement that there are two types of unemployed persons (‘lazy’ vs. ‘disabled/ill’) and so arguably no overt resolution to the disagreement. Instead, there is a sequence of laughter by SF14 (line 19), which is reciprocated by SF13 (line 20). The occurrence of shared laughter here precedes a new topic (see Holt 2010, Sharma 2012), viz. a return to task management talk about the organisation of the presentation the students are asked to do.

It is important to highlight that both the origin and the dissenting turns show a lot of linguistic alignment through response tokens, overlapping and latched speech and sentence completions, increasing the impression of a joint performance. However, the actual problem, i.e. whether or not to differentiate between disabled and other unemployed people and remains unresolved. This suggests that although students seem to accept disagreements as a necessary part of developing arguments and solving problems, they are content in achieving rather superficial resolutions.

Extract 5 is taken from a mock-exam where students were asked to develop a presentation to a (fictitious) EU body recommending practices to improve the lives of disabled persons. Note that throughout the exam, there is a confusion in terminology with the terms ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘disabled’ being used interchangeably for ‘disabled’. Overall, this extract shows a similar pattern to that established for the role plays in 4.2.

Extract 5. Donating for disabled people

1 SM4: and have you already thought about possible

Classroom Discourse

- 2 improvements for disadvantaged (.) people
- 3 SM3: yes (.) ehm the donation
- 4 SM4: okay yeah (.)
- 5 SM3: because money cannot matter
- 6 SS: ha ha ha
- 7 SM4. yeah you're totally right but if a man would
- 8 ask you (.) to spend eh to donate hundred
- 9 euro for disadvantage people (.) would you
- 10 [do it]
- 11 SM3: [sorry] I didn't catch what you said
- 12 SM4: ha ha a:h SM3
- 13 SS: ha ha
- 14 SM3: can you repeat↑ this
- 15 SM4: yeah if a man would ask you to donate hundred
- 16 euro for disadvantaged people (.) would you
- 17 donate it
- 18 SM3: yes that's the problem
- 19 SM4: yeah because you say money doesn't matter
- 20 SM3: yeah
- 21 SM4: but (.) that point is the problem I think
- 22 SM3: okay
- 23 SM4: because money matters too much
- 24 SM3: okay (.) ((sighs)) yes (.) but the people who
- 25 want to spend m- eh (.) want to donate money
- 26 they do so (1.29)
- 27 SM4: yeah that's absolutely right
- 28 SM3: the <ipa> fjuez </ipa> of this presentation are
- 29 people who want to spend money and are very
- 30 interested in disabled person
- 31 SM4: yeah I hope so SM3 ha

32 SM3: yes

The extract starts with SM4 prompting SM3 about suggestions for improvements for disabled citizens. In terms of accomplishing the task, it is worth noting that this strategy of asking the other student lessens the burden on SM4 of providing ideas. In line 3, after delays through a response token 'yes', a pause and a hesitation marker, SM3 provides his statement of opinion that the lot of disadvantaged people will be improved through a (charitable) donation. This is first acknowledged by tokens of agreement (line 4) by SM4, but the following clarification by SM3 (line 5) is met with laughter by the other students (line 6). While identifying the function of laughter unambiguously is difficult, it appears that in this case the overall effect is one of playfully dealing with potential embarrassment. The first dissenting turn by SM4 (lines 7-10) is formulated as a counterclaim with a very strong agreeing element ('yeah you're totally right') followed by a challenge. This is followed by a repair sequence, initiated by SM3 through an explicit request for reformulation (lines 11 and 14). Interestingly, the first repair initiation is met with laughter and an exclamation of SM3's name by SM4 and by laughter from the other students. SM3 is seen as struggling a little with the task at hand and the general effect of the laughter on participants (and observers) was one of making this situation less serious, in line with the generally supportive atmosphere in this classroom. The original dissent by SM4 is taken up again in lines 15-17 in three sequences: counterclaim (lines 15-17), challenge (line 19) and counterclaim (lines 21 & 23). All these dissents are acknowledged with agreement by SM3 (lines 18, 20, 22), indicating alignment. Nevertheless, SM3 does not seem to affiliate with this dissent, even if he now first limits the potential donors to 'the people who want to donate money' in lines 24-26 and then states that the entire audience of this presentation can be subsumed under this category (lines 28-30). The resolution of this rather long disagreement again is fast and arguably superficial.

This example shows very powerfully just how much overt alignment exists in disagreements in these paired exams. All turns are characterised by frequent response tokens and also extended responses, as in lines 16 and 24, indicating that the responsibility of performing this disagreement lies jointly with both participants throughout all turns, rather than each speaker being responsible only for their parts.

To summarise, we find that the fully student-performed disagreements are of largely two types, i.e. contradiction (unhedged in response to factual statements, and hedged in response to statements of evaluation/opinion) and counterclaims, most frequent in reaction to evaluations/opinions, with rare instances of challenge and none of irrelevancy claims. The disagreement episodes are characterised by their overt linguistic alignment, in the form of collaborative completions, lexical and non-lexical agreement markers, etc. Also, students show a tendency to quick, rather superficial resolutions, and rarely use disagreements for further negotiations or clarifications of their arguments.

Factors affecting these behaviours are arguably the collaborative nature of the assessment itself, where presumably a good performance relies on both partners, and the greater equality of interactants, which entitles both partners to initiate disagreements. Finally, the possibility that partners have practiced with each other and might have developed a paired style or even an overt agreement on specific behaviours cannot be ignored.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the of disagreement episodes within the discursive practice of oral L2 assessments shows that these occur in all three formats at similar levels (13, 10 and 10 episodes respectively). This suggests that being able to disagree is an inherent part of this type of L2 interactions and supports Angouri and Locher's (2012) assertion that disagreements are 'sine qua non' for decision-making and problem-solving activities.

The diverse assessment formats resulted in systematically different disagreement trajectories; a fact that is significant if we consider the need to assess students' ability to perform disagreements as part of their required proficiency level of B2. Thus, we find that the students in both teacher-led formats do not initiate any disagreements and in the interview format, students do not even produce any dissenting turns. Arguably, this is a result of being constrained by the power relationship between teacher and student. In the interview format, disagreements are treated similarly to other-corrections, resulting in quick acknowledgement of the teacher's position as correct. This can be seen as evidence of a positioning of the teacher as having epistemic primacy (Stivers et al. 2011), on issues both of

language and of moral knowledge, as well as a more general effect of the asymmetric role distribution in classrooms (see, e.g., Cazden 2000; Seedhouse 2004, Sharma 2012, 2013, Walsh 2006, 2011) The role play format allowed students to produce dissenting turns of diverse types in response to the initial dissents by the teacher. Here, challenges on the part of the teacher are most likely to result in students developing their arguments further, often through adding clarifications and explanations to their subsequent dissenting turns. This has the effect of delaying the resolution, but arguably leads to deeper engagement with the inherent opposition of the disagreement. However, this format proved somewhat taxing for some students, who clearly reached the limit of their abilities (cf. Extract 2). The paired exam allowed students to initiate disagreements and showed a diversification according to the origin of the disagreement, with a factual origin resulting in a pattern similar to the teacher-led interview and an evaluation/opinion origin resulting in a counterclaim (sometimes counterclaim + challenge). However, students typically resolve disagreements quickly and superficially in this format, showing that one key element of disagreeing, i.e. resolving a conflict by taking both opposing stances into account, is missing.

In all three formats, there is an examination interpretative frame present, within an overarching teaching frame. There is evidence in the formats involving a teacher of them also ‘doing teaching’, for instance, in extract 2, where the teacher tries to make the student appreciate the moral dilemma he has identified in the task⁸. In general, classroom practices and the high levels of familiarity between speakers probably affect patterns of behaviour. This is aided by the perceived need of students in paired exams to support one another and the fact that they have chosen to go into this high-stakes exam as a pair, which also involves them practicing together in the run-up to the exam and going into the mock-exams together. In the teacher-led formats, the assessment frame implies a generally supportive atmosphere, probably aided by the public nature of the exams where teachers would like their students to perform well and so be a credit to their teaching.

Arguably, however, the most important finding is that disaffiliation can co-exist happily with linguistic alignment in this discursive practice. This pattern of linguistic alignment despite overt

⁸ For similar instances of teachers-cum-examiners incorporating teaching elements in their examination see Sandqvist & Sandlund 2013

disaffiliation in opposition of opinion, evaluation or factual knowledge is observed in all three exam formats, but it is strongest in the paired exams. Reasons for this can only be speculated upon here; a possibility lies in the fact that these disagreements within an assessment task appear of less importance to students than offering overall mutual (including linguistic) support in ‘performing in the L2’ to the best of their joint abilities. Thus, we might argue that linguistic alignment can express an interpersonal affiliation despite content-related disaffiliation. This appears to run counter to observations in L1 discourse (see e.g. Kangasharju 2002, Schiffrin 1984), but it would be interesting to see if, for instance, L1 classrooms produced similar patterns. If they did, the question of the status of disagreements in terms of participants’ stake in these could be more thoroughly addressed.

As comparable student cohorts produce very different disagreement trajectories, these findings suggest that even small contextual differences are of paramount importance in making specific language behaviours more or less likely. Also, the use of disagreements has clear effects on the remainder of the language produced, often leading to more sophisticated argumentations (see, e.g., extract 2). Given the importance in such assessed contexts of students performing to the best of their abilities, these findings raise implications for teaching and assessing practice in Austrian EFL classrooms. On the level of precise disagreement types, it appears that challenges and counterclaims are more conducive to furthering argumentations by encouraging interlocutors to provide further justifications for their points of view. Drawing teachers’ awareness to these effects of diverse types of disagreement could be beneficial in facilitating students’ language production. I would also suggest that the exam format used constrains students in terms of producing (or not producing) disagreements in their L2. This leads to the absence of student disagreements in the teacher-led interview being expected, whereas arguably in the paired exam, the same absence would be more marked in terms of indicating a gap in student ability. More research is clearly needed on the affordances made through specific exam formats, but the findings presented here suggest that the implied equality of the three testing formats in the Austrian context ought to be challenged.

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Appendix

Transcription Conventions

SF1, F2, etc.	- female student identified
SM1, SM2, etc.	- male student identified
SS	- several students unidentified
TF1, TF2, etc.	- female teacher identified
TM1, TM2, etc.	- male teacher identified
[- onset of overlapping speech
]	- termination of overlapping speech
=	- latched turn, i.e. turn follows onto another without pause
ju-	- abrupt word termination
xxx	- unintelligible speech
(action)	- unsure transcription
(4.2)	- pause in seconds
(.)	- short pause of one second or less
<ipa> vi:s</ipa>	- marked non-standard pronunciation
°mine°	- noticeably softer speech
CAPITALS	- noticeably louder speech
<first time>	- noticeably slower speech
>second time<	- noticeably faster speech
↑↓	- sharp intonation rise/fall
hh	- audible aspiration
((laughter))	- description of events/non-verbal actions
<u>Buchstabe</u>	- German speech
trans	- translation