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# A multimodal perspective on adult learners' vocabulary explanations in the beginner-level L2 classroom

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## ABSTRACT

Following the current research in conversation analysis in the field of second language (L2) learning, the present study demonstrates that beginner-level adult learners actively contribute to vocabulary explanation sequences by mobilising multimodal resources including depictive gestures, gaze, and short verbal turns. The data consist of video-recordings of whole-class interactions in a beginner-level L2 French classroom for adults with migrant backgrounds. The analysis shows how the depictive gestures deployed by learners serve either to represent concrete words, directly depicting the target item, or, combined with a short verbal explanation, to make more abstract concepts visible by contextualising the target word and associating it with a larger context of use. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the functioning of vocabulary explanations in the L2 classroom and, in particular, of the specific participatory dynamics in language classes for beginner-level adult learners.

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## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary explanations are one of the most typical activities in the second language (L2) classroom. Explaining vocabulary requires both knowledge of the concerned vocabulary and the competence to make that knowledge accessible to others (Waring, Creider, and Box 2013). It is a complex activity, which includes mobilising linguistic and embodied resources, logical thinking, and adapting to the interactional partners and the context (Dalton-Puffer 2007; Heller 2016; Fasel Lauzon 2014; Mortensen 2011). It can thus present a challenge for learners with limited linguistic L2 resources. Moreover, being able to explain is an important vector of social recognition, allowing one to demonstrate both initiative and expertise (Waring 2011). Explanations are also practices transferable beyond the classroom and essential in many everyday and professional situations.

Bodily and material resources have been shown to play a crucial role in explanations (e.g. Lazaraton 2004; Waring, Creider, and Box 2013; Tai and Brandt 2018; Käätä, Kasper, and Piirainen-Marsh 2018; Kupetz 2011; Merke 2016; Eilola 2020) and might facilitate the comprehension as well as the contextualisation of such explanations. Previous conversation analytic research on second language acquisition (CA-SLA) has focused on teachers'

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multimodal explanations, showing how teachers coordinate several types of resources to clarify the meaning of unknown words or create imaginary situations, allowing students to understand how specific lexical items of the target language can be used in particular contexts (Lazaraton 2004; van Compernelle and Smotrova 2017; Sert 2015; Waring, Creider, and Box 2013; Tai and Brandt 2018).

With very few exceptions (Eilola 2020), explanations in the beginner-level L2 classroom have not yet been examined systematically with regard to the multimodal resources learners deploy to realise vocabulary explanations. Situated within the theoretical and methodological framework of multimodal conversation analysis (Sacks 1992; Mondada 2018), the present study examines vocabulary explanation sequences to which learners contribute actively by mobilising several multimodal resources including depictive gestures, gaze, and short verbal turns. In particular, I focus on explanation sequences including 'depictive hand gestures', described by Streeck (2009, 150) as 'motions of the hand [that] produce pictures of the world' through drawing, handling, or mimetic practices. These gestures serve to describe concrete objects, but also more abstract concepts or actions. My findings thus contribute to a deeper understanding of the functioning of multimodal vocabulary explanations in the L2 classroom and, in particular, of the specific participatory dynamics in language classes for beginner-level adult learners.

In what follows, I review research on explanations in the classroom provided by teachers and learners (sect. 2) and present my data and method (sect. 3). In the analytic section (sect. 4), five excerpts are examined in detail to show how learners use depictive gestures in two different types of explanation sequences: (a) repetition of the target word + depictive gesture, and (b) verbal explanation + depictive gesture contextualising the target word. The analysis demonstrates how learners deploy depictive gestures to explain different categories of words, including concrete objects, verbs of action, and abstract nouns. The depictive gestures either have a direct lexical affiliate or serve to contextualise the target word. The study shows how learners' active engagement in explanation sequences allows them to co-construct learner-relevant knowledge and demonstrate their expertise, even with limited linguistic resources and no shared L1 in the classroom. The learners take initiatives, reconfigure institutional roles, and become active participants in classroom interactions. I conclude by summarising the main findings and discussing some pedagogical implications of the study for L2 teachers (sect. 5).

## 2. Explanations as interactive activity

The present study draws on research in CA-SLA, which conceives of explanations from an interactional perspective. Rather than considering explanations as individual productions, this contribution conceptualises explanations as a situated practice that is interactionally produced, sequentially organised, and collaboratively achieved (Tai and Khabbazzbashi 2019b; Heller 2016). It approaches participants' production of explanations as including the use of not only linguistic knowledge, but also interactional resources such as appropriate turn-taking and the co-construction of larger sequences conjointly with co-participants.

Vocabulary explanations are explanations of lexical items produced in an attempt to clarify the meaning of such items and make them intelligible to a co-participant who has, for instance, expressed a comprehension problem (Tai and Khabbazzbashi 2019b; Dalton-Puffer 2007). The term 'explanation' overlaps with other related concepts, such as

definition, information or justification, and is considered in this article as an umbrella term, so that these concepts can be regarded as important elements in explanations (see Dalton-Puffer 2007; Fasel Lauzon 2014). In the classroom, explanations are traditionally provided by the teacher, but learners can also contribute to them in a collaborative way. Explanations do not necessarily take the form of extended verbal turns but may also consist of single words. As will be demonstrated in this study, vocabulary explanations can also consist of an embodied action, for example a depictive gesture representing the meaning of a lexical item.

### 2.1. *The teacher's explanations*

Teachers' explanations as interactive practices have been examined in a range of settings including content classrooms (Kääntä, Kasper, and Piirainen-Marsh 2018; Koole 2010; Morton 2015), mother tongue instruction contexts (Stoewer and Musk 2019), as well as L2 classrooms (e.g. Lazaraton 2004; Majlesi and Broth 2012; Mortensen 2011; Sert 2017; Tai and Brandt 2018; Tai and Khabbazzbashi 2019b; van Compernelle and Smotrova 2017; Waring, Creider, and Box 2013).

Several studies emphasise the role of the teacher in highlighting specific words that become the focus of the explanation sequences, by repeating them or displaying them on the board (Mortensen 2011; Morton 2015). By contrast, Stoewer and Musk (2019) as well as Majlesi and Broth (2012) display how different verbal sources are collaboratively turned into 'teachables' or 'learnables' at the learners' own initiative, 'for the [students'] relevant needs of an emergent learning project that may be quite different from the teacher's pedagogical agenda' (Majlesi and Broth 2012, 193).

Micro-analytic studies on classroom explanations have also examined the role that teachers' gestures and other bodily and material resources play in providing explanations (Kääntä, Kasper, and Piirainen-Marsh 2018; Lazaraton 2004; Sert 2017; Tai and Brandt 2018; Tai and Khabbazzbashi 2019a, 2019b; van Compernelle and Smotrova 2017; Waring, Creider, and Box 2013). In L2 classrooms, teachers' gestures may enhance the verbal explanations by making them more comprehensible and concrete for the learners as well as convey the context-specific and locally relevant meaning of unknown words (Lazaraton 2004; Tai and Khabbazzbashi 2019a, 2019b; van Compernelle and Smotrova 2017). By coordinating embodied and material resources, the teacher can also clarify key concepts and situate them in relation to the larger activity (Kääntä, Kasper, and Piirainen-Marsh 2018).

Studying an adult ESL classroom, Waring, Creider, and Box (2013) identify two categories of vocabulary explanations: analytic and animated explanations. The former engages mainly verbal and textual resources while the latter involves an ensemble of multimodal resources. The authors further divide animated explanations into three types: (a) Talk + gesture concerns gestures that serve to illustrate or elaborate talk 'where each movement has its lexical affiliate, i.e. the word illustrated by the gesture' (Waring, Creider, and Box 2013, 255); (b) Talk + environmentally coupled gestures (see Goodwin 2007) refers to gestures the meaning of which can only be understood in relation to the material surrounding, for instance a drawing on the board or a pointing to an object; (c) In Talk + scene enactment, described by Tai and Brandt (2018) as 'embodied enactments', the teacher physically creates imaginary scenarios, involving gestures and dialogs, allowing students to understand how the target language can be used in specific contexts, thus creating a link between classroom discourse and

language use outside the classroom. Waring, Creider, and Box (2013) note that the analytic approach is best suited to explain abstract nouns or verbs. On the other hand, verbs that imply physical activities lend themselves easily to an animated approach that includes visual detailing. By contrast, according to van Compernelle and Smotrova (2017, 210), using depictive gestures and embodied enactments is not only relevant for ‘depicting concrete, action-based meanings’ and visible objects and simple verbs, but also to make ‘abstract concepts visible and concrete’.

## 2.2. *The learners’ explanations*

Most of the studies dealing with explanations in the classroom focus on teachers’ explanations. This might be due to the fact that traditionally, teachers are considered the language experts in institutional settings and thus in charge of providing vocabulary explanations. However, learners also frequently assume the role of explainers, displaying ‘contingent, rather than static’, expertise in the classroom (Koshik and Seo 2012, 174; Eilola 2020; Fasel Lauzon 2014; Heller 2016; Kupetz 2011; Llinares and Morton 2010; Merke 2016). Llinares and Morton’s (2010) study, combining corpus linguistics and conversation analysis, compares learners’ explanations in two different contexts: CLIL classroom discussions and individual interviews. Their findings show that students produce longer, richer, and more varied explanations during the interviews than in the classroom discussions. By contrast, in the classroom, students’ opportunities to produce longer bits of explanations tend to be reduced by the teacher who provides frequent evaluative turns and has more control on the unfolding trajectories of the explanation sequences. These findings highlight the crucial role of the teacher to provide the students with the inter-accidental space to offer explanations in the classroom.

Focusing more precisely on the resources mobilised by the learners to realise explanations, Fasel Lauzon (2014) draws up an inventory of linguistic resources used by fairly advanced L2 French learners and shows that the resources vary depending on the type of explanation. Most often, for vocabulary explanations, learners resort to translation into their shared L1 or suggest a synonym of the target word (for advanced L2 learners’ explanations, see also Merke 2016). Kupetz’s (2011) study in a CLIL classroom also examines students’ explanatory resources, but focuses specifically on the multimodal resources one of the students uses to provide an explanation, for instance lexicosemantic resources, drawing, pointing, and arm gestures. The student actively recruits his co-participants to deal with language and content problems and the activity of explaining is therefore achieved collaboratively.

One of the very few CA studies which examined how L2 learners provide vocabulary explanations in a beginner-level classroom is by Eilola (2020). The author investigates multimodal lexical explanations offered by adult Finnish L2 learners with emergent literacy and notes that explanation sequences typically begin with the teacher bringing a word to the collective attention. After several repetitions of the word by different learners, they explain it by producing depictive gestures or embodied enactments. When the explainable is a concrete object, the gesture representing it is usually related to the action performed on the object. For instance, the word ‘vesipullo’ (*water bottle*) is represented by the action of drinking in an imaginary bottle. The teacher then provides feedback on the explanation and initiates a discussion about the semantics of the word. The above literature thus suggests

that, when offered interactional space, learners provide explanations in the classroom by drawing on both linguistic and embodied resources, including translation, use of synonyms, drawing, pointing, depictive gestures, and embodied enactments.

To sum up, the reviewed literature shows that vocabulary explanations have received significant attention in L2 classroom interactional research. However, the majority of the existing studies focus on teachers' explanations and/or have investigated settings where there was a shared L1 between the participants (e.g. Fasel Lauzon 2014; Merke 2016). To date, there is limited research (with the exception of Eilola 2020) that examines vocabulary explanations undertaken by learners, and especially learners in beginner-level L2 classrooms where there is an absence of shared L1 between teachers and learners (and among the learners themselves). The present study fills in this research gap by exploring vocabulary explanations in the beginner-level L2 French classroom, thereby specifically concentrating on the participatory dynamics of language classes gathering learners with migrant backgrounds. The analysis examines cases where the vocabulary explanation is embedded within the ongoing activity and extracted 'on the fly' (Mortensen 2011) by the participants. The main focus is on the multimodal participatory strategies deployed by learners, that enable them to contribute actively to explanation sequences and demonstrate their expertise, even with limited linguistic resources.

### 3. Data and method

The data used for this study consist of video-recordings of whole-class interactions in a L2 French school for adults with migrant backgrounds in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. The data comprise approximately 50 hours of recordings spanning over 4 months. The recordings were made by the author of the article, who was present in the classroom during all lessons. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants in easy French and informed consent was received from all participants using consent forms available in French, English, Arabic, Tigrigna and Farsi, languages with which learners were familiar. Pseudonyms are used in the transcripts and all images have been anonymised. Classes were taught by either one of two teachers who are both experienced L2 teachers, one being the regular teacher (Jenny) and the other one the substitute teacher (Fabienne) who was teaching a few weeks during the summer. The class consists of eight learners, seated in a U-shaped arrangement. They take intensive (14 hours a week), state-funded beginner-level French classes as part of an integration programme.

The study adopts a multimodal conversation analytic perspective. The data extracts used in this study have been transcribed according to Jefferson's (2004) transcription conventions and the multimodal transcription conventions developed by Mondada (2018).

The whole data set was used to build the core collection on which the article is based. An initial collection included all vocabulary explanation sequences in which at least one learner took part ( $n = 124$ ). This first selection comprised extracts in which learners mobilised a range of different resources (verbal, embodied, material) to participate in the explanation sequences. This broad collection was then refined to include only explanation sequences in which a learner used depictive gestures as a resource to explain ( $n = 23$ ). A distinction was finally made between teacher-initiated and learner-initiated explanation sequences, as explanations provided in response to learners' explanation requests differ from the ones that are offered in response to the teacher's (display)

questions. When learners spontaneously initiate explanation requests without previous solicitation from the teacher, they indicate their real need to overcome a difficulty in understanding. The explanations provided in response to these requests are then oriented towards constructing student-relevant new knowledge (Merke 2016). In the extracts analysed, learners initiate a vocabulary explanation by extracting a word written in their local environment, either on the board or on an exercise sheet, and formulating an explanation request about this word, thus interrupting the ongoing activity. The final collection consists of 12 learner-initiated vocabulary explanation sequences in which depictive gestures are part of the explanation.

## 4. Analysis

My findings reveal two types of student-initiated vocabulary explanation sequences including depictive gestures:

- (a) Repetition of the target word + depictive gesture
- (b) Verbal explanation + depictive gesture contextualising the target word

In the first type of vocabulary explanation sequences, learners deploy gestures that serve to illustrate talk and have a direct lexical affiliate. By combining the repetition of the target word and a depictive gesture, learners explain concrete nouns, verbs of action or adverbs. By contrast, the second type of explanation sequences is used by learners to explain more complex concepts which cannot necessarily be explained only by means of the repetition of the target word and a depictive gesture. The combination of a short verbal turn and a depictive gesture, produced simultaneously, serve to contextualise the target word, for instance by associating it with a common context of use. These two types of vocabulary explanation sequences will be described in the next sections and illustrated with five excerpts from my corpus.

### 4.1. Repetition of the target word + depictive gesture

Excerpts 1 – 3 illustrate the first type of embodied explanations. After a learner-initiated vocabulary explanation request, that highlights a comprehension problem targeting a specific word, another learner repeats the target word and produces a depictive gesture which is directly affiliated with the target word.

In excerpt 1, the class is engaged in an activity that combines the revision of possessive determiners and of everyday vocabulary. The teacher, Jenny, writes sentences on the board that the learners have to complete by choosing a determiner. At the beginning of the excerpt, Jenny finishes writing the sentence 'You have a comb, it's \_\_\_\_ comb' (in French), when Mimoun initiates an explanation request *qu'est-ce que c'est bien* ('what is it comb', with a non-standard pronunciation of French *peigne* 'comb', l. 02). Verbally, he does not address his request to a specific participant; but while producing it, he gazes at the teacher. Even though Jenny cannot see his gaze, she directly initiates repair on the pronunciation of the word *peigne* ('comb', l. 03). By doing so, she does not orient to Mimoun's explanation request targeting the semantics of the word, but only to its correct pronunciation.



In line 04, another participant, Dawadi, repeats the target word, and he then provides an embodied explanation: he moves his hand over his head with a closed fist several times, as if handling a comb (Figure 1). His gaze is first directed towards the teacher but then, while still producing the gesture, he also glances in direction of Mimoun (l. 08). Dawadi's explanation thus serves on the one hand to demonstrate his knowledge to the entire group and, more specifically, to the teacher who ratifies the explanation with a nod (l. 07), and on the other hand to help another learner understand the meaning of an unknown word.

As Mimoun's turn in line 07 is not understandable, his reception of the explanation is not very clear. In line 08, Jenny begins her own explanation of the target word. She does not offer feedback on the learners' embodied explanations but gives an account for her choice of the words in the exercise that goes on for several turns (not shown in the transcript). In line 10, Kaleb also provides an embodied explanation: he produces a depictive gesture like that of Dawadi, moving his hand over his head with a closed fist. His explanation is a more 'private' one, in the sense that it is produced only once and addressed to his neighbour, Omowumi, towards whom Kaleb turns his gaze (Figure 2).

The excerpt shows students' use of depictive gestures combined with the repetition of the target word to provide vocabulary explanations to co-participants. These explanations do not take the form of extended verbal turns and, at the linguistic level, are only composed of the repetition, by several learners, of the target word. In the case of the second explanation, the one performed by Kaleb, the target word is not even repeated, given that it has been mentioned before, and the explanation is based solely on the depictive gesture. The space offered by the teacher, who orients at first only to the correction of the pronunciation of the target word by Mimoun, gives the learners the opportunity to provide their own explanations.

These observations highlight the fact that learners use methods for explaining vocabulary items that are similar to those documented in prior research for the teacher (*animated approach*, Waring, Creider, and Box 2013, *embodied explanation*, Sert 2017), deploying gestures that serve to illustrate talk and have direct lexical affiliates. Similar to Eilola's (2020) findings, we see how a concrete word is represented by a hand gesture related to the prototypical action performed with the target object, instead of depicting the form or the size of this object. Producing and understanding this type of depiction, described as 'handling' by Streeck (2009, 139), require experiential knowledge of the world, not a dictionary-like knowledge.

The excerpt also illustrates the role of gaze both in addressing a gestural explanation to the entire group, for the purpose of displaying knowledge and understanding, and in helping a precise co-participant to solve a comprehension problem.

**Excerpt 2** provides a further illustration. This time, the target word is not an object, but a verb of action, *se battre*<sup>1</sup> ('to fight'). In this excerpt, the learners are engaged in an individual activity in which they associate verbs of movement with pictograms. In line 01, Kaleb initiates an explanation request by delivering the target word with a rising intonation.

**Excerpt 2: 'to fight'**

```

01   KAL   °se° se battre?
           to fight
02   (1.0)
03   DAW   €se •ba÷tt€re?
           to fight
           ÷looks twd KAL-->
aya   €looks-KAL€
aya   •clenches fist-->>
04   $@xbou€[m.
           bang
05   AYA   [se# batxtre, #@x
           to fight
daw   $punches the air 3x-->
kal   @looks twd DAW----->@
aya   x.....xpunchesx,,,
aya   €looks twd DAW-->
fig   #1      #2

```



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

```

06   fouais huh£x€÷$
           yeah huh
aya   //////////////x
aya   ----->€
daw   ----->÷
daw   ----->$
07   JEN   ouais on voit pas bien
           yeah we can't see well

```

After a gap in line 02, Dawadi addresses Kaleb's request by delivering an explanation constructed as a 'complex multimodal Gestalt' (Mondada 2014): he first repeats the target word, also with rising intonation, while turning his gaze towards Kaleb (l. 03), and then he produces a mimetic enactment (i.e. a depiction of a physical action, Streeck 2009), punching the air three times (Figure 1), combined with the onomatopoeia *boum* ('bang', l. 04). This multimodal explanation is oriented to by Kaleb, who looks at Dawadi (l. 05).

In parallel, another learner, Ayana, also provides an embodied explanation in response to Kaleb's explanation request. She turns towards him and clenches her fist slightly (l. 03), and then starts a punching movement with her arm (Figure 2) while repeating the target word (*se battre*, 'to fight', l. 05). However, she interrupts her depictive gesture before fully accomplishing it (l. 05). Her close monitoring of Dawadi's action, on which Kaleb is also focusing, probably explains the interruption of her gesture: Kaleb is not looking towards her, and her gesture would be redundant after the one produced by Dawadi. In line 06, Ayana confirms Dawadi's explanation with an affirmative token (*ouais*, 'yeah') produced with smiley-voice and followed by a laugh particle, thereby possibly orienting to the unconventional nature of Dawadi's explanation. The teacher does not provide any feedback with regard to Dawadi's explanation; rather, she comments on the bad quality of the printed pictograms, thereby accounting for the potential difficulty for the learners to do the exercise: *ouais on voit pas bien* ('yeah we can't see well', l. 07). Just like in the previous example, by not reacting immediately after Kaleb's explanation request, she offers some space to the learners to provide an explanation by themselves. Kaleb does not respond verbally to the explanation, but his reorientation to his sheet (not shown in the transcript) to continue the activity indirectly signals his reception of the explanation.

In sum, this excerpt shows a similar sequential unfolding as [Excerpt 1](#), with a learner spontaneously formulating a vocabulary explanation request and another learner providing an embodied explanation. In this second excerpt, the explanation is designed as a 'complex multimodal Gestalt' (Mondada 2014), in which linguistic resources, gaze, and depictive gestures are combined. In addition, this excerpt illustrates the fact that, even if the participants have the possibility to produce several explanative gestures simultaneously without creating the same type of overlap as with talk, they do not necessarily do so. Gestures are only used as explanatory resources if they are inspectable for what they are to the co-participants, that is, if they are performed at the right time and in a manner in which co-participants can see them.

The third excerpt shows how the combination of a repetition of the target word with a depictive gesture is used also by learners to explain more abstract concepts, in this case the adverb *partout* ('everywhere'). In this excerpt, the learners are engaged in a text comprehension activity. The teacher left the classroom for a few minutes and asked the learners to work individually in silence. The researcher sits in a corner and observes the classroom. The learners read the text and make fun of each other by saying 'shh' as soon as someone utters a word.

## Excerpt 3 'everywhere'

```

01          (7.0)
02  MIM    qu'est-ce que c'est pa*rtoute?
           what is it everywhere ((non-standard pronunciation))
           xgazes twd RES-->

03  Ω@ (0.5)   x (0.2) Ω@
kal    Ωsits up straightΩ
kal    @gazes twd MIM-->@
mim    -->xgazes twd KAL-->>

04  KAL    Ω@pa@rtout.#
           everywhere
           Ωdraws circle with LH-->
           @glances-RES@gazes twd MIM-->

fig          #1

```



Fig. 1

```

05  ???    SH::Ω@ sh.
kal    -->Ω
kal    -->@

06  MIM    *partout.#
           everywhere
           *draws circle with RH-->

fig          #2

```



Fig. 2

```

07  ???    sh::
08  RES    à tous les*endroits.
           in all the places
mim    -->*

```

In line 02, Mimoun initiates a request for a vocabulary explanation, *qu'est-ce que c'est partout* ('what is it everywhere', with a non-standard pronunciation of French *partout* 'everywhere'). The recipient of this request is the researcher, whom Mimoun looks at while producing his turn. However, his request does not receive an immediate response from the researcher. During a silence following the request for explanation, another participant, Kaleb, sits up straight and looks at Mimoun, and Mimoun turns towards him (l. 03). Kaleb then provides an explanation to Mimoun, using a drawing gesture (Streeck 2009)(l. 04): he draws a large horizontal circle with his left hand and repeats the target word with a standard pronunciation (Figure 1). This hand movement traces an imaginary line in front of him, which depicts a large space and represents the target word *partout* ('everywhere').

We observe how the two learners orient to the different levels of language expertise in the classroom: on the one hand, Mimoun first addresses his request to the researcher and it is only afterwards, when he receives no answer, that he turns towards Kaleb. On the other hand, Kaleb glances in the researcher's direction while producing his depictive gesture, both checking the researcher's conduct and exhibiting his knowledge in front of her. The two learners thus attribute a higher level of expertise to the researcher, thereby showing an orientation towards expertise as fluid and possibly exercised by different participants (Koshik and Seo 2012).

In line 06, Mimoun repeats Kaleb's explanatory gesture (Figure 2) and the standard pronunciation of the word with a falling intonation. By repeating the target word and the return gesture (Eskildsen and Wagner 2013; de Fornel 1992), Mimoun hence seems to display his understanding of the adverb *partout* ('everywhere'). It is only after this that the researcher provides a verbal explanation of the word, using a paraphrase, *à tous les endroits* ('in all the places', l. 08). Similarly to the teacher, the researcher does not evaluate the learner's explanation and her delayed reaction to the explanation request leaves space for the learners to provide the explanation.

This excerpt shows that the objects of explanations combining depictive gesture + repetition of the target word also can be less 'concrete' words, such as *partout* ('everywhere'). Even when the explanation targets an abstract word, learners do not resort to extended verbal turns. This is not a problem for the participants, however, since a shared understanding seems to be reached, even with this method of explanation.

The three cited excerpts differ in terms of the object of the explanations and the method of depiction (Streeck 2009). In [excerpt 1](#), the target word is a concrete noun, a material object ('comb'), which is explained through a handling gesture related to the action performed with the object. In [excerpt 2](#), the word explained is a verb of action ('to fight'), depicted by a mimetic enactment, whereas in [excerpt 3](#), it is an abstract adverb ('everywhere') which is represented by a drawing gesture. Despite these differences, the three excerpts illustrate that the learners skilfully combine a specific constellation of resources, including the repetition of the target word, depictive gestures directly affiliated to the target word, and gaze, to explain unknown words to their peers.

## 4.2. Verbal explanation + depictive gesture contextualising the target word

I now analyse excerpts 4 and 5 to illustrate the second type of learners' embodied explanations. In these cases, the explanation is composed of a verbal turn that does not merely repeat the target word, and a depictive gesture that does not directly represent or illustrate this word. In contrast to the first three examples, the combination of the verbal turn and the depictive gesture, produced simultaneously, serves to contextualise the target word. Contextualisation is used here to designate the 'process of placing a vocabulary item in context' (Waring, Creider, and Box 2013, 251), for example by association with a common context of use or a list of concepts connected to it, or by situating the item in relation to the ongoing classroom activity. This second type of embodied explanations helps learners to explain more complex and abstract concepts, which cannot necessarily be explained solely by means of the repetition of the target item and a gesture illustrating it.

In the following excerpt, the learners are engaged in an activity which involves answering a series of questions by looking at a picture of a city. One of the questions is 'What is the speed limit on the Geneva Street?', and the answer is indicated by the presence of a 30 km/h speed limit sign on the picture. In line 01, Mebratu requests an explanation of the French word for speed: *c'est quoi vitesse* ('what is speed'). This request is responded to by his neighbour, Omowumi, who answers in Tigrigna, a language that they both share (l. 02), but Mebratu does not react to Omowumi's turn.

### Excerpt 4 'speed'

```
01  MEB  c'est quoi vitesse?
      what is speed
02  OMO  ( )((Tigrigna))
03  MIM  x*avec #voi*tuxre.
      with car
      xlooks twd MEBx
      *shakes fists up-down*
fig  #1
```



Fig. 1

```
04  JEN  vitesse,
      speed
05  MEB  vitesse,
      speed
06  JEN  eu:h,
      uh
07      trente kilomètres heures quarante kilomètres heures,
      thirty kilometers hours forty kilometers hours
08      soixante kilomètres heures (.) the speed.
      sixty kilometers hours
```

In line 03, Mimoun turns his gaze towards Mebratu and provides an embodied explanation: he produces a verbal turn that associates the term 'speed' with the term 'car', *avec voiture* ('with car'). Simultaneously, he accomplishes a depictive gesture: he puts both hands in front of him in closed fists and moves them up and down, as if handling a steering wheel (Figure 1). His explanation relies on the association of the word 'speed' with a common context of use, driving, thereby creating a link between classroom discourse and language use outside the classroom (Tai and Brandt 2018). The depictive gesture does not represent exactly the target word but is part of the explanation by contextualising the target word. Jenny completes this explanation by repeating the target word and giving examples of speed limits that are candidate answers to the question posed in the exercise, 'What is the speed limit on the Geneva Street?', and then she offers a translation into English (l. 07–08). She does not evaluate or provide feedback with regard to Mimoun's explanation but offers additional information to the explanation. Similarly to [excerpt 2](#), Mebratu does not verbally signal his reception of the explanation, but closes it by asking a question about another part of the exercise (not shown in the transcript).

This excerpt illustrates a second type of embodied vocabulary explanation provided by the learners. This type of explanation also involves a depictive gesture which is associated with a verbal turn just like in the excerpts of [section 4.1](#), and the verbal component is quite short. However, in this case, it is not a mere repetition of the target word. The explainer uses the verbal turn + depictive gesture combination to contextualise the target word and associate it with a common context of use, thus creating a link between a word encountered in a classroom task and the use of this word outside the classroom, in everyday life.

Another noticeable element is the fact that the explanations offered by Mimoun and Jenny orient towards the achievement of the task at hand and serve to situate the target word in relation to the larger activity (Kääntä, Kasper, and Piirainen-Marsh 2018). The aim is that Mebratu understands that the term 'speed', in this context, is linked to 'car' (and not, e.g. speed of a rocket), potentially allowing him to orient towards the road signs drawn on the picture to find the expected answer to the exercise.

[Excerpt 5](#) presents similarities with the preceding one: the embodied explanation sequence is composed of depictive gestures associated with short verbal turns providing a list of elements connected to the target word. This simultaneous combination of talk and gestures serves to contextualise the target word. Additionally, the excerpt highlights the collaborative nature of the explanation sequences and the use of depictive gestures not only by the learners, but also the teacher. Before the excerpt, the participants were correcting a text comprehension exercise. For this exercise, they had to read several short extracts of text and associate them with Swiss city names. In the text about the city of Sion the word *manifestation* appeared, which in this context can be translated as 'cultural event'. The excerpt begins with Mimoun requesting a vocabulary explanation from Fabienne, the substitute teacher (l. 01–02).

**Excerpt 5 'cultural event'**

01 MIM ( ) madame en si:on il y a (.) menifessation?  
*madam in sion there is cultural event ((non-standard pronun.))*  
 02 MIM qu'est ce que c'est ça?  
*what is it that*  
 03 FAB alors attendez y a une question,  
*so wait there is a question*  
 04 des manifestations c'est des événements.  
*cultural events are events*  
 05 (.)  
 06 MIM °pas compris°  
*not understood*  
 07 FAB des concerts.  
*concerts*  
 08 MIM °concert°  
 09 FAB des- un concert c'est oùΔ y a# de la musique.Δ  
*a concert it is where there is music*

Δextends left arm, repeated movements over it with RHA

fig

#1



Fig. 1

10 FER oui  
*yes*  
 11 MIM a:h,  
*oh*  
 12 FAB pour le public une [manifestation,]  
*for the audience a cultural event*  
 13 MIM [musicien? ]  
*musician*  
 14 FAB des musiciens c'est pas juste des musiciens qui jouent dans  
*musicians it's not only musicians playing in*  
 15 >dans la-< dans la rue mais c'est un concert dans une salle  
*in the- in the street but it is a concert in a hall*  
 16 (.) ou dans un théâtre.  
*or in a theatre*

17 FER €•[plein de mon#de€•quiregar#de] qui •filme. €  
*a lot of people watching filming*  
 €draws circle---->€moves hands back and forth->€  
 •looks twd MIM--->•looks at her hands•looks twd MIM-->

fig

#2

#3



|        |     |   |
|--------|-----|---|
| Fig. 2 |     | Fig. 3  |
| 18     | DAW | \$applaudir. \$<br>to applaud<br>\$claps hands\$                                      |
| 19     | FER | concert,=*<br>-->*  |
| 20     | FAB | [=voilà c'est ça. ]<br>yeah that is it<br>fer claps hands-->>                         |
| 21     | MEB | [(concert) ( ) (concert)]   |
| 22     | FER | [*bravo applaudir.* ]<br>bravo to applaud   |
| 23     | FAB | [une manifestation c'est ça]<br>a cultural event it is that<br>mim *claps hands---->* |

Similarly to the preceding excerpts, this one begins with an explanation request by one of the learners (l. 01–02). The difference here is that an explanation is immediately provided by the teacher. Just after asking the other participants for their attention, she offers an explanation in response to Mimoun's request, using a synonym, *des manifestations, c'est des évènements*, ('cultural events are events', l. 04). Following a claim of non-understanding (c.f. Sacks 1992) by Mimoun, *pas compris* ('not understood', l. 06), the teacher tries to explain the target word by providing a list of different elements defining a cultural event (l. 07, 09, 12, 14–16) and producing a depictive gesture: she moves her right hand back and forth over her extended left arm, depicting the action of playing the violin (Figure 1). However, as her explanation still receives no visible sign of understanding from Mimoun, two other learners (Ferhana and Dawadi) intervene to complete the teacher's explanation.

Ferhana adds two elements to the teacher's list: while producing the first part of her turn, *plein de monde* ('a lot of people', l. 17), she draws a large circle in front of her with her two hands, depicting with this drawing gesture (Streeck 2009) the broad audience of a cultural event (Figure 2). She then continues the second part of her turn, *qui regarde qui filme*, ('watching filming', l. 17), and moves her hands back and forth at eye level, index and middle fingers extended (Figure 3). Her gesture represents the action of looking, exaggerated with hand movements, to allow her interlocutor to clearly perceive the importance of the gaze. At the beginning of her turn, she directs her gaze towards Mimoun, then looks at her own hands, to signal to her interlocutor the relevance of her gesture (Streeck 2009, 2021). Dawadi adds another element by clapping his hands and

saying *applaudir* ('to applaud', l. 18). This mimetic gesture is repeated by Ferhana, who also claps her hands (l. 20–22). In line 20, Fabienne provides a first ratification of the learners' explanations, *voilà c'est ça* ('yeah that is it'). While continuing to applaud, Ferhana completes Dawadi's proposal with *bravo applaudir* ('bravo to applaud', l. 22). Repeating the gesture proposed by Dawadi and Ferhana, Mimoun in turn claps his hands (l. 23). This return gesture (Eskildsen and Wagner 2013; de Fornel 1992) seems to display his (at least partial) understanding of the embodied explanation offered by Dawadi and Ferhana.

The sequential unfolding of this excerpt differs from the preceding ones. Here the learner-initiated explanation request is immediately followed by an explanation from the teacher. However, this does not prevent two learners from taking the initiative to complete the explanation provided by the teacher and participate in the co-construction of meaning. Depictive gestures are an integral part of the explanation and their combination with short verbal turns serves to contextualise the target word. Just like in the previous example (Excerpt 4 'speed'), the depictive gestures produced by the learners do not represent exactly the target word, but collaboratively complete the teacher's list, intended to provide Mimoun with a panorama of contextual elements connected to the target word.

We also observed how the explanation sequence is collaboratively constructed. On the one hand, the gestures are distributed among the participants and a gesture proposed by one participant can be taken up by others, to elaborate the explanation or display understanding. On the other hand, the collaborative nature of the explanation is visible through the recycling of other participants' turns (c.f. Stoewer and Musk 2019). Furthermore, the excerpt demonstrates that depictive gestures are not only used by learners. The teacher also gives explanations by using a combination of words and gestures. In doing so, she provides the learners with a possible example of how to deliver an explanation in the classroom. By adapting to this explanation method, learners ensure that their way of explaining is treated as appropriate.

In these two excerpts, the learners employ a combination of short verbal turns + depictive gestures to contextualise complex and abstract concepts and either associate them with a context of everyday use or place them within a list of items related to them. This allows the recipient of the explanation to understand the target word in relation to a larger context of use (Kääntä, Kasper, and Piirainen-Marsh 2018). In the two extracts, as in the three previous ones, learners show agentivity and take the initiative to provide an explanation to another learner, even if in the last extract this explanation is complementary to the one provided by the teacher.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper set out to analyse beginner-level L2 French learners' vocabulary explanations that are accomplished through a combination of language and depictive gestures. Focusing on learner-initiated vocabulary explanation sequences, the findings have revealed two different types of explanation sequences including depictive gestures: (a) repetition of the target word + depictive gesture, and (b) verbal explanation + depictive gesture contextualising the target word. The depictive gestures serve either to explain concrete words or verbs of action, directly depicting the target concept, or, combined with a short verbal explanation, they make more complex and abstract concepts tangible

and visible by contextualising the target word and associating it with a larger context of use. These findings concur with and extend van Compernelle and Smotrova's (2017) study on teachers' explanations as regards the use of gestures to make abstract concepts visible and concrete. My study demonstrates that it is not only the teachers that use depictive gestures to provide clear and comprehensible explanations of vocabulary, as demonstrated by previous research (Lazaraton 2004; Sert 2017; Tai and Khabbzbashi 2019a, 2019b); the learners do so equally. The learners' depictive gestures may be combined with linguistic resources, such as a repetition of the target word or onomatopoeia, and gaze, as part of 'complex multimodal Gestalts' (Mondada 2014).

The analysis also highlights the highly collaborative nature of explanation sequences. The explanations are co-constructed by the learners, who frequently recycle other co-participants turns or gestures and collaborate to add elements to explanations in-progress, thus helping each other to reach a shared understanding of unknown vocabulary. This active participation by the learners is also encouraged by the teachers' and researcher's behaviour. By delaying their own explanations, they give learners the opportunity to participate and offer their own explanations to their peers (Llinares and Morton 2010). A point that remains to be scrutinised in future research is the reception of learners' explanations by other learners. The way learners receive explanations including depictive gestures and signal their (non-)understanding provides crucial information about the role and impact of such explanations as supporting tools in the learning process.

The present findings provide insights into the complexity of beginner-level L2 French classroom interaction and contribute to a deeper understanding of the functioning of vocabulary explanations in this type of classrooms. I have shown that learners' active participation in explanation sequences allowed them to position themselves as 'available and at times reliable linguistic experts' (Merke 2016, 11), thus reconfiguring the traditional institutional roles. By helping their co-participants to solve knowledge gaps, learners demonstrate their linguistic competence, not only in terms of passive understanding, but also in terms of use, for example by associating a word with its common context of use in everyday life. More specifically in this case, the analysis highlights that learners are able to participate even with a low level of L2 proficiency and no shared L1 in the classroom. That is, they draw upon verbal and embodied resources, such as repetition of the target word and depictive gestures, to make their explanations easier to understand for their co-participants. Doing so, they also demonstrate their L2 interactional competence (Pekarek Doehler and Pochon-Berger 2015; Pekarek Doehler and Berger 2018; Skogmyr Marian 2022), namely their ability to recipient-design their talk and adapt it to the context of use, as well as to co-construct larger sequences of actions with others. In the studied classroom, not all learners necessarily participate significantly in the explanation sequences. It is therefore important to point out that repetition is also participation, especially for beginner-level learners (Eilola 2020; Berger 2016; Skogmyr Marian 2022). By repeating the target word, some learners participate peripherally in the interactions, without having to take the floor in a central way. Moreover, by providing explanations to spontaneous learner-initiated explanation requests, which may not be part of the teacher's pedagogical agenda, learners co-construct learner-relevant new knowledge. The present analysis thus adds to recent studies on student initiative that show how learners collaboratively create 'frames for their own learning opportunities' (Mortensen 2011, 157; e.g. Waring 2011; Solem 2016; Merke 2016; Garton 2012; Tai and Brandt 2018).

The study has potentially important implications for teaching practices and teachers' education in several ways. First, the findings challenge a view of classroom interaction as including fixed institutional roles, and suggest that L2 learners actively contribute to the activity of explaining by deploying 'subtle resources [...] to construct meaning' (Kupetz 2011, 135). Therefore, L2 teachers in beginner-level classrooms should be encouraged to concentrate on the many interactional resources their students have rather than to focus only on the verbal productions. They should create opportunities for students to use various multimodal resources, allowing for the explainer and the co-participants to collaboratively negotiate meaning. A possible suggestion is to enhance teachers' awareness of the positive effects of the learners' use of gestural resources to reach mutual understanding and solve knowledge gaps.

Second, the study highlights the importance for teachers to give learners room to interact in the classroom, in particular to request vocabulary explanations and provide explanations to student-initiated requests. This does not necessarily mean that teachers have to rely only on specific speaking tasks to encourage learners to interact. As suggested by Llinares and Morton (2010), by delaying their answer to a request or withholding their evaluation of a proposed explanation, teachers already encourage L2 learners to produce longer and richer explanations.

Third, since explaining vocabulary is a 'massively common pedagogical action' (Markee 2017, 380) which can be observed in every L2 classroom, it could be productive to enable L2 teachers to reflect on their practices in focusing on vocabulary explanation sequences. As proposed by many researchers (e.g. Sert 2021; Pekarek Doehler 2021; Nguyen and Malabarba 2019), the use of audio-visual material and CA methodology in teachers' education could provide the opportunity for teachers to observe in detail the unfolding of classroom interactions. Analysing videos coming from the teachers' own lessons would certainly encourage self-reflection (Sert 2021) and contribute to the development of 'classroom interactional competence' (Walsh 2012).

Finally, explanations are omnipresent activities in our social lives, far beyond the classroom; in fact, they are essential in many everyday and professional situations. Therefore, understanding how learners provide explanations within the context of the L2 classroom can help teachers develop pedagogical activities that promote those interactional resources that are key to the learners' participation in social encounters outside the classroom.

## Note

1. In French, 'se battre' is a reflexive verb, in which 'se' is the reflexive pronoun and 'battre' the infinitival verb-form.

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