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Transforming instruction to activity: Roleplay in language assessment

Abstract: Roleplay is used as a method for education and training, assessment, and research across a wide range of academic and occupational domains, including applied linguistics. In the assessment of speaking and pragmatic competence, roleplay is used to examine how test takers produce and understand social action-in-interaction and in this way overcomes the problem of "construct under-representation". Roleplay is also chosen for assessment purposes because it accommodates the opposing needs for authenticity and standardization in the design of assessment instruments. While the research literature is mainly concerned with the issue of how roleplay corresponds to real-life interaction, this study asks the more fundamental question of how participants manage to produce roleplays as intelligible unfolding social scenes in the first place. Specifically it explores how the roleplay setup becomes interactionally consequential in roleplays designed to assess the interactional competence of students in an English for academic purposes program. From the joint perspectives of conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis, the study demonstrates how the roleplay participants mobilize their generic and setting-specific interactional competences to accomplish the scenario as a shared practical activity. It shows how the participants jointly "talk the institution into being", and what details from the setup they treat as necessary, optional, or dispensable. In this way the study reveals the local endogenous order of roleplay as a device for knowledge generation, training, and assessment and spawns further topics for research on roleplay design and interactional competence in a language assessment context.

Keywords: conversation analysis, interactional competence, membership categorization analysis, oral language assessment, roleplay

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1 Introduction

In a widely accepted definition, Crookall and Saunders (1989) describe roleplay as "a social or human activity in which participants 'take on' and 'act out' specified 'roles', often within a predefined social framework or situational blueprint (a 'scenario')" (15-16). Roleplays and related activities such as simulations and games[1] are used as methods for education and training, assessment, and research across a wide range of academic and occupational domains. Stokoe (2014) observes that "the communication training world at large" relies on roleplay and simulation for training and assessment purposes "almost exclusively" (257). In applied linguistics, roleplay is predominantly used as a method for teaching, assessing, and conducting research on pragmatics. The standard rationale for choosing roleplay is that it enables researchers and professionals to manage two conflicting goals, namely to generate interactional behavior that approximates unelicited interaction while at the same time affording some measure of control over that interaction. On the methodological advantage of roleplay in comparison to other frequently used formats of data collection, Thornton and Cleveland (1990) note:

> Unlike direct observation, simulation allows greater control and opportunity for manipulating an event and understanding subsequent behavior. Unlike questionnaires, simulations elicit overt behaviors of participants related to complex skills such as communication, decision making, and interpersonal interactions (191).

In research on second language pragmatics, roleplay has a long tradition as a data collection format that generates interactional data and so allows researchers to observe how L2 speakers understand and produce social actions through turntaking and sequence organization (e. g., Al-Gahtani and Roever 2012, 2013, 2014; Edmondson et al. 1984; Félix-Brasdefer 2007; Gass and Houck 1999; Huth 2010; Trosborg 1995). When second language researchers choose simulated talk as data over natural interaction, they typically do so because roleplays allow them to manipulate variables that are of theoretical interest, for instance the participants' first language (Edmondson et al. 1984) or their general proficiency in the second language in cross-sectional

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1 This article focuses specifically on roleplays because this format of simulated interaction is most widely used in applied linguistics and specifically in language assessment, the domain of this study. While roleplays, simulations and games are taken as distinct activities (Wright-Maley (2015) proposes a conceptual clarification), the epistemological and methodological discussion applies to all of them.

studies (Al-Gahtani and Roever 2012, 2013, 2014; Trosborg 1995), or sociopragmatic factors such as power and social distance (Fulcher and Márquez Reiter 2003). In second language teaching, roleplay came to prominence in early communicative language teaching (e. g., Wildner-Bassett 1984) and continues to be used as an instructional method to "de-classroom the classroom situation" (Sharrock and Watson 1985), in other words, to construct activities that require and develop real-world competencies in ways that the standard socio-interactional organization of the classroom does not afford (Huth 2010; Taleghani-Nikazm and Huth 2010). Roleplay also has a long tradition as a method of language assessment, the domain of interest in this paper.

2 Roleplay in language assessment

In two traditions within language assessment, roleplay has a history as the format of choice to overcome the problem of "construct under-representation", a method effect produced when "a test is too narrow and fails to include important dimensions or facets of the construct" (Messick 1989: 34). The first and by far the older of the two are tests of spoken language ability, or oral proficiency. These tests are delivered in the form of an oral interview led by a trained tester, such as the oral proficiency interviews (OPI) of the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) or the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). A roleplay component is often included in the interview in order to elicit a wider range of speaking opportunities than the interviewer-structured interaction affords, such as requesting, complaining, suggesting, and other actions in everyday contexts in accordance with the targeted scale level. In these OPI roleplays, as we will call them for short, the tester announces the roleplay at some point during the ongoing interview, instructs the test taker in the scenario and their role, and assumes the part of interlocutor. As in the interview-structured test portions, the tester must simultaneously monitor whether the test taker performs at the expected proficiency level and in the negative case adjust the ongoing roleplay in accordance with test protocol. Consequently the tester has to make a continuous assessment of the test taker's speaking ability, in addition to providing a holistic rating after the conclusion of the interview.

As has frequently been noted in the academic language testing literature, the construct of "proficiency" predates the communicative movement in language education by several decades and is not grounded in any theory of

language use[2] (Johnson 2001; McNamara and Roever 2006). It evolved from the practical need to assess whether L2 speakers have the necessary language ability to successfully participate in various professional and educational contexts and is operationalized through scaled level descriptions. In contrast, tests of pragmatic competence have been firmly grounded in pragmatic theory from the outset. In the first wave of tests for pragmatic competence, the target construct was based on speech act theory and Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. Modeled as an individual cognitive capacity, the construct was appropriately operationalized through non-interactional test formats that elicited productions or understandings of isolated speech acts in the target language (Liu 2006; Roever 2005, 2013; Youn and Brown 2013), although roleplay was a format in the toolkit for pragmatic assessment from the start (Hudson et al. 1995; Levenston 1975; Sasaki 1998; Yamashita 1996). Under the impact of the interactional turn in pragmatics (D'hondt et al. 2009), and specifically of conversation analysis, the second wave in pragmatic assessment saw a fundamental revision of the target construct. For a construct grounded in *interactional* or *discursive* pragmatics (Bilmes 1993; Kasper 2006), the non-interactional test formats were no longer serviceable (Roever 2011; Walters 2013). On the other hand, roleplay, as an interactionally constituted activity, is seen as affording the necessary infrastructure for examining how test takers produce and understand social action-in-interaction through turns and sequences. Roleplay is therefore considered an appropriate test format to operationalize the construct of interactional pragmatic competence (Grabowski 2013; Walters 2007, 2013; Youn 2015).

3 The problem of (in)authenticity

In all areas of application, the defining quality of roleplays as *simulated* talk is also seen as a cause for concern (Stokoe 2013). A common line of argument is that roleplays are socially *inconsequential* (e. g., Al-Gahtani and Roever 2012; Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 2005; Gass and Houck 1999; Felix-Brasdefer 2007) and therefore license *inauthentic, unnatural* behavior. Hence, so the argument goes, roleplay interaction may not offer a *valid representation* of unelicited

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2 A reviewer commented that in the OPI context the "functional trisection" (function, content, accuracy) proposed by Higgs and Clifford (1982) was the original attempt to define language use.

interaction in real life (see Huth [2010] for an incisive critique). We do not dispute that for many practical and research purposes, "authenticity", in the sense of correspondence between interaction in the roleplays and interaction in the real-life encounters that the roleplay is intended to represent, is a valid concern (Van Compernolle and McGregor 2016). However in this paper we set comparison between "real" and "simulated" interaction aside and ask the more fundamental question of how participants manage to produce roleplays as recognizable unfolding social scenes in the first place. The question complicates the distinction between the real and the simulated by relocating the issue from researcher-stipulated dichotomy to a matter that the participants themselves come to terms with as they accomplish the roleplay as a form of intelligible social practice. For this undertaking we adopt the analytical stance of earlier ethnomethodological studies and recent conversation-analytic work that elucidate the endogenous order of roleplays as a social practice.

4 Roleplay as a social practice

Although rarely acknowledged in the applied linguistics literature, a series of early studies examined roleplay, simulation and gaming from the perspective of ethnomethodology and, to a lesser extent, conversation analysis (CA) (e. g., Francis 1989; Sharrock and Watson 1985; Watson and Sharrock 1990). These studies are distinctive in that they bracket the divide between "real" and "simulated" interaction and instead treat roleplay and simulations as any other social activity, that is as intelligible, jointly accomplished interactional order with its own normative organization, participation structures and inferential frameworks. An ethnomethodological approach

> views the intelligibility and orderliness that a setting or activity has for its participants as the methodical product of situated 'work' of practical reasoning. In seeking to describe this practical reasoning, ethnomethodological analysis pays attention to two massively observable but taken-for-granted features of social behaviour. These are the *contingency* of interaction and its *locally oriented* character (Francis 1989: 54, our italics).

The analytical issue then is to elucidate in detail how the participants orient to and interpret the problems and identities specified in the roleplay setup through their visible conduct and manage them as interactional contingencies. For that undertaking the participants engage "communicative/interactional competences" that are "not game-specific but which form their generic cultural and interpretive competences" (Watson and Sharrock 1990: 237), competences that, as in any social activity, are jointly calibrated by the participants to the project

at hand. In addition to the generic methods of producing and understanding social actions in interaction, the same membership knowledge of social settings, categories and relationships that evolves from and sustains participation in everyday life is also available to participants in simulation. Recent conversation-analytic studies of roleplay in research on second language pragmatics (Al-Gahtani and Roever 2012, 2013, 2014) and peer activities in foreign language classrooms (Huth 2010) provide further evidence of how participants' "communicative/interactional competences" as social members are fundamental to their accomplishment of specific actions in roleplay scenarios. In addition, Huth's study also shows how the student participants orient to the roleplay prompts at different moments during their interaction and how their understandings and contingent elaboration of the task specifications build on their ordinary interactional competencies to collaboratively accomplish everyday activities among acquainted social equals.

5 The roleplay setup in language assessment

The different traditions in the assessment of "oral proficiency" and pragmatic competence, described above, have practical consequences for participants' production of roleplays in language testing contexts and the data available for research. In the case of the OPI roleplays, the available corpora are typically audio recordings of actual OPIs that were made for rating and training purposes. Because the OPIs are recorded in their entirety, the transitions from the interview-structured section and the roleplay are documented. These records show how the tester manages to introduce the roleplay and how it gets underway. As Okada (2010) examines in detail, the transitions between activities involve complex footing shifts (Goffman 1974; Goodwin 2007) between the participants' real-world institutional identities as tester and test taker and their fictive identities in the roleplay (e. g., customer – service provider, hotel guest – receptionist). At the same time, the participants' real-world identities remain omnirelevant[3] (Sacks 1992) during the course of the roleplay. While acting as a confederate, the tester's category-bound charge is to monitor

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3 "An omni-relevant device is one that is relevant to a setting via the fact that there are some activities that are known to get done in that setting, that have no special slot in it, i. e., do not follow any given last occurrence, but when they are appropriate, they have priority" (Sacks 1992, Spring 1966, lecture 6).

simultaneously whether the test taker constructs their actions in ways that are not only plausible in a real-life setting but also in accordance with the roleplay instructions. Okada and Greer (2013) show that testers use two methods to pursue task-relevant uptake. One method to redirect the candidate to the sequential and topical requirements of the roleplay frame is to use multiple questions, a practice that is well documented in naturally occurring talk (Davidson 1984; Linell et al. 2003) and in the interview-structured portions of the OPI (Kasper and Ross 2007). The other method is to withhold talk to give the candidate the opportunity to recognize that they have not performed the action required by the roleplay instruction and to self-initiate repair. The sequential placement and the length of the gaps of silence would not pass as meaningful in naturally occurring talk at a comparable sequential moment and show the interviewers' orientation to the purpose of the roleplay as an activity for language assessment.

Unlike OPI roleplays, the roleplays examined in the literature on testing interactional pragmatic competence have been conducted in the context of test development and validation (Grabowski 2013; Walters 2013; Youn 2015). As the published research reports reveal, the roleplays are set up in different ways, but it appears that only the bounded activities of the performed roleplays are recorded (Walters [2013] expressly notes this much.). While there is thus no documentation of how the roleplay setup[4] is interactionally accomplished and how shifts to the roleplay, or in the case of multiple simulated scenarios, between them, are managed, the specifics of the roleplay setup are visible as a participant resource in the ongoing roleplay interaction. For instance, in Walters' study, test-takers and testers were "'playing themselves,' two members of the same university community" (2007: 165) who therefore shared relevant local knowledge while also bringing their personal biography to the table (also Huth 2010). In these "idiographic roleplays" (Kern 1991), such epistemic resources were not only relevant and consequential for the interaction but also for the assessment purpose. Two of the three test targets were responses to assessments (as social action, Pomerantz 1984) and to compliments. In the examples in the research report, the test takers disagree with the tester's assessment and compliment in ways that treat the "assessables" as matters of the test takers' stakes and interests outside of the research setting (also Huth 2010). The responses were less tightly bound to the initiating action

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4 The lack of documentation of how research activities get underway is standard in experimental research (see critique in Kobayashi-Hillman, Ross and Kasper, this Special Issue) and shows researchers' understanding that the setup of the focal activity is irrelevant to the research purpose.

than normatively expected and prompted diverging ratings among the CA-trained raters.

In the remainder of this paper, we will further explore how the roleplay setup becomes interactionally consequential in a language assessment context from the joint perspectives of conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis (Hester and Eglin 1997; Fitzgerald and Housley 2015).

6 Roleplay in an EAP context

The roleplays examined for this study were conducted as part of a larger project on the formative assessment of pragmatic competence for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in a university program (Youn 2015). The selected scenario is a student's request for a letter of recommendation from a professor, an activity that had turned up in a needs analysis as a high priority item for stakeholders. Similar to the "roleplay with complications" in the OPI roleplay (Ross and O'Connell 2013), the design features contingencies that the participants had to introduce into the interaction in a sequentially fitting manner (see instructions below). The participants were international students in EAP courses (N = 102) at intermediate and advanced levels of English proficiency. The four interlocutors were L1 speakers of English and graduate students with professional experience as instructors of undergraduate courses or academic English.

For the purpose of assessing pragmatic competence, authenticity and standardization of test instruments and test delivery are considered critical to ensure valid inferences to test-takers' performance in target contexts (McNamara and Roever 2006; Roever 2011). The roleplay instructions (see Youn 2013) embody the institutional requirements of authenticity and standardization.

> **Situation**: You have an appointment with Professor Morgan Brown today to ask for a recommendation letter for a scholarship for international students from your department. Your professor is meeting with you outside of his/her office hours since you have a class at that time. Now you're about to visit your professor. You just enter the professor's office.
>
> **For undergraduate participants**: This professor teaches Economy 101 that you're taking this semester.
>
> **For graduate participants**: This professor is one of the faculty members in your department. Although he/she is not your advisor, you've known this professor for about one year and you're currently taking a course from this professor.
>
> > **Task**: You will receive role-play cards that describe what you're going to tell your professor. Please have a conversation with your professor naturally.

Roleplay card for examinee ("Jessie")

1. After a greeting, **ask for a recommendation letter** for the department scholarship that you will apply for. The letter is due in one week.

2. Respond to what the professor says and **tell the professor that you will check with your department office**.

3. Inform the professor of two options for providing the letter, **by hardcopy or electronic submission** through a website. **Ask for the professor's preference**.

Roleplay card for interlocutor ("Professor")

(1R) Respond to the request. Inform the student that you will write the letter and ask when the due date is, if the student doesn't tell you. Inform the student that you have a conference next week and you're leaving tonight. Tell him/her that you will do your best to submit the letter by the deadline, but ask the student if the letter can be submitted a bit late.

(3R) Prefer an electronic submission as you will be traveling.

The instructions are notably more detailed than in the genre of "open roleplay" reported in the literature (e. g., Al-Gahtani and Roever 2012; Huth 2010). With the directions for specific actions on the roleplay cards, the design of the roleplay gives higher priority to standardization. As a further measure to increase standardization in assessment roleplays, the setup routinely includes interlocutor training (Grabowski 2013; Walters 2013). In their training for the EAP roleplay, the interlocutors were given the instruction to agree to write the recommendation letter (Youn 2013).

6.1 From instruction to activity

The paramount generic problem for roleplay participants is how to transform the instructions into an interactional activity that is recognizable, for themselves and the overhearing professionals and researcher, as a socially meaningful version of the described scenario. Even instructions as detailed as those for the recommendation letter roleplay remain "instructions *in vacuo*" since the roleplay directions "do not provide for their own application" (Sharrock and Watson 1985: 200). For working out how to interpret and operate on the instructions, the participants have several resources available *in situ*: their language competence, specifically their reading competence,[5] their generic interactional competence as ordinary social members (Okada 2010), their institutional knowledge as members of their academic

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5 The written instructions were clarified interactionally between the experimenter and the student participants before the beginning of the roleplay. Since the assessment construct was the students pragmatic interactional competence, difficulties arising from their reading comprehension would have introduced construct-irrelevant variance (Messick 1989).

setting, and the contributions of the co-participant to the ongoing talk. The institution-specific membership knowledge made relevant by the instructions is categorial and sequential: it requires that the participants recognize and take up the complementary pair positions in the student-professor relationship as a standardized relational pair[6] (Sacks 1972) through sequentially ordered category-bound actions (Bushnell 2014; Watson 1997).

Our analysis will focus on how the participants, and in particular the student-participants, use the description of the scenario ("Situation"), the specifications for the two student-participant categories ("For undergraduate participants", "For graduate participants"), and the first directive to the student-participants (request for a letter of recommendation and due date) to accomplish the activity. While the participants unavoidably produce the activity together, our focus on the student comes from the documented information about the roleplay setup. From the roleplay cards we have access to the corresponding instructions for both participant categories and to the extensive scenic descriptions for the student-participants. Details of the oral interlocutor training, on the other hand, are not available. Finally, in the excerpts and analysis, we will refer to the participants in the roleplay with the category terms *student* (S) and *professor* (P). With this convention we join the standard representational practice in the research literature of referring to parties in institutional talk by the categories under which they participate. However, we should note that rather than treating these categories as unexplicated resources for analysis, we will ask how the participants treat their roleplay identities as membership categories, that is, as organizations of cultural knowledge that the parties produce and orient to through collaboratively accomplished action sequences and other conduct (Watson 1997).

6.1.1 Generating the activity "office appointment with a professor"

Without exception, the participants take the description of the scenario as "an appointment with a professor" as a directive to produce their talk as an activity that is recognizable as an academic consultation, that is, an encounter specialized for "offering and seeking academic help" (Limberg 2010: 35). Excerpt 1 illustrates a common format through which the participants launch the activity.

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6 A standardized relational pair (SRP) "constitutes a locus for a set of rights and obligations concerning the activity of giving help" (Sacks 1972: 37).

Excerpt 1 ID 20

```
1 P: hello::
2 S: hello do you have time?
3 P: Yes Jessie please come in sit down (.)
4    what can I do for you
```

The opening sequence evolves through several ordered adjacency pairs. Here P's initial greeting projects a greeting by S as a second pair part. In the data corpus, though not in this excerpt, the greeting exchange is frequently initiated by S, which may show S's orientation to the directive on the role card. S's check whether P "has time" indexes the scenic description "your professor is meeting with you outside of his/her office hours" and embodies the understanding that a professor's physical presence in their office does not equate with their availability. P confirms with an affirmative answer and two ordered invitations that reflexively constitute him as the occupant of the physical space, his "office", and S as a visitor. The invitations direct S to participate in the bodily arrangement of the office hour. With the inquiry about S's reason for her visit (line 4; Limberg 2010) P makes relevant the SRP professor-student ("what can *I* do for *you*", our italics) and moves the interaction to the business of the appointment. The participants also invoke the instructions by constructing their social relationship as acquainted nonequals with asymmetrical naming practices.

Through sequence organization and distribution of actions bound to the categories of student and professor, the participants visibly produce the initial talk in their encounter as a particular kind of institutional activity – visibly for themselves and overhearing raters and researchers who share membership knowledge in the setting. Regardless of the L2 speakers' proficiency level, the participants jointly manage to "talk the institution into being" (Heritage and Clayman 2010) as they build the opening of the consultation. Stability and variation in the organization of the openings across dyads exhibit how the participants invoke, elaborate, and disregard the role-play setup. For example, some students invoke the description of the appointment taking place outside of P's office hours with an appreciation ("thank you for meeting me outside of his/her office hours"), while the description does not surface in the majority of openings. The reason why the student requested the unscheduled appointment ("you have a class during the office hour") is never brought up in the talk. From the descriptions of the professor and how the student knows them, the participants consistently take away the generalization that they are professional familiars, showing up

as in Excerpt 1. On the other hand, the specific details of their acquaintance almost never find their way to the interactional surface.

6.1.2 Requesting a letter of recommendation

P's inquiry about the reason for S's visit projects a second pair part that provides a slot for S to place the request for a recommendation letter (Excerpt 1, line 4). Throughout the corpus the students show that they recognize the inquiry as an offer for help and predominantly invoke the instruction of requesting a letter. Excerpts 2 and 3 illustrate how S operates on the setup components for this project.

Excerpt 2 ID 20
```
4   P:  what can I do for you
5   S:  Ah:m I- (.) I plan to apply (0.2) the international
6       student scholarship=
7   P:  =Mm
8   S:  and I nee:d a letter (.) recommendation letter
9   P:  Mm↑hm
10  S:  so could y-you write me >could you write< it for me?
11  P:  Yes: I'd be happy to=
12  S:  =°uh huh°
```

Excerpt 3 ID 59
```
6   P:  what can I do for you
7   S:  yea(h)h hhh I have a question about a uhm (.)
8       recommendation letter=
9   P:  =hm↑=
10  S:  a=cause ah: I was going to (0.3) uhm I'm going
11      to apply (0.3) for a department scholarship
12  P:  uh huh↑
13      (0.3)
14  S:  so: uh I wonder if you can write a
15      recommendation letter for me
16  P:  Yes yes >I'd be happy to<
17  S:  hh thank yo(h)u hhh
```

In both excerpts, S launches a request sequence that progresses through two pre-expansions (actions prefacing the request, Schegloff 2007; Al-Gahtani and Roever 2012; Taleghani-Nikazm and Huth 2010) before the actual request is

made. In their prerequests the students invoke the instruction by formulating their intention to apply for a scholarship as an account, and they selectively use details from the description ("a recommendation letter for a scholarship for international students from your department") to characterize the scholarship (Excerpt 2, "international student scholarship"; Excerpt 3, "department scholarship"). P treats either description as referentially adequate. After each of the prefacing turns, P provides an acknowledgment while passing up a turn and in this way treats S's project as ongoing. The students transform the directive "ask for a recommendation letter" into requests with different turn formats, but the formatting differences remain interactionally inconsequential. In either case P promptly agrees in next turn to write the letter, as stipulated in the instruction. In a further elaboration of the instructions, S acknowledges P's agreement (Excerpt 2) or thanks P (Excerpt 3) as sequence-closing thirds (Schegloff 2007). The request sequences are organized in the same way as in talk among first language speakers (Schegloff 2007; Taleghani-Nikazm 2006) and in roleplayed interactions with advanced L2 speakers (Al-Gahtani and Roever 2012). Specifically, the participants treat the sequence of requesting and agreeing to write a reference letter as bound to the SRP student-professor and so reflexively generate the SRP ("sequence-generated categories", Bushnell 2014).

On a few occasions S amplifies the description or instruction as a preliminary to the request, for instance by saying "I am experiencing some financial hardship" to account for their application for the scholarship. Such elaborations are the exception. More commonly S does not incorporate necessary details from the setup. P then treats the unmentioned information as relevantly absent through repair initiations, as in Excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4 ID 42

```
7      S: so (0.9) I need (0.5) uh recommendation letter
8      P: [okay
9      S: [for (0.5) scholarship
10     P: ↑oh okay,
11        (0.6)
12     S: So
13        (0.3)
14  →  P: what kind of scholarship
15        (1.3)
16     S: department scholarship
17  →  P: okay you're applying for a department [scholarship¿
18     S:                                       [mmhmm
```

```
19       (0.4)
20    P: [good
21    S: [how can I do
22       (0.3)
23    P: uh huh
24       (0.6)
25  → P: ↑oh are you asking [me for a letter?
26    S:                    [yeah
27    S: yeah [I have a question °so°
28    P:      [okay
29       (0.3)
30    P: Sure
31       (0.3)
32    S: mmhmm=
33  → P: =yeah I can write a letter for you
34       (0.4)
35    S: mm[hmm
36    P:      [for the scholarship
37    S: Okay
```

P's other-initiations of repair construct three unmentioned stipulations as relevant absences: the subcategory of scholarship that the recommendation letter is for (line 14), S's plan to apply for a department scholarship (line 17), and her asking P for a letter (line 25). The repair initiations operate on the same trouble source ("multiples", Schegloff 2000), S's sequence-initial informing "I need (0.5) uh recommendation letter for (0.5) scholarship" (which P treats as a preliminary not a request). These formats project different response trajectories. In response to the first OI, designed with a wh-question (line 14), S incorporates the solicited detail from the description in the repair (line 16). P's candidate understandings (lines 17, 25), on the other hand, project confirmations as their preferred response. S responds with agreement tokens (lines 18, 26, 27) in a sequentially appropriate fashion and so displays that she understands the corresponding stipulations from the setup, but she does not incorporate the stipulations in her production. P, noticeably the driving force in this request sequence, accedes to the request by formulating her ability (line 33) rather than willingness as in the previous excerpts, and in this way takes a less affiliative stance towards S's project. Through the repair initiations and P's manner of granting the request, P treats the unmentioned stipulations from the setup as relevant and procedurally consequential absences.

To conclude this section, we will consider a case in which S's understanding of "writing a recommendation letter" as a category-bound activity generates a very different sequence.

Excerpt 5 ID 27
```
8      P: what can I do for you
9      S: okay uhm today I'm (.) I have some problem with the
10        rec- .hh uh recommend(.)dation letter?
11     P: Mmhmm
12  →  S: uhm I (.) I don't know how to (.) write uhm to get
13        the .hh department scholarship?
14        (0.4)
15     P: Mmm
16     S: uhm (0.5) yeah but uh (0.5) uh it's the first time I
17        have to (0.4) to do this
18        (0.7)
19     P: [mmhmm
20     S: [°yeah° so I want uh (0.6) maybe (0.3) >if you< you
21        can give (.) me some advi:ce (.) °on this°
22  →  P: >so you< so you want a recommendation letter is that it?
23        (0.3)
24     S: yeah .hh uh I don't know how to write exactly: uhm (0.7)
25        and I I (0.5) I think you can (.) help me (0.5) some
26        uh (0.5) uhm some instruction lik- (0.3) for example
27        structural (0.5) °and°
28  →  P: usually for the department scholarship the
29        professor writes the recommendation letter
30        (0.7)
31  →  P: is that what you need a recommendation letter from me?
32        (1.0)
33     S: uhm: (0.5) YEah yeah
34  →  P: yeah okay so you don't have to write it (0.3)
35        I write it
36     S: oh okay
37     P: okay?
38     S: °hmm°
39     P: hm and sure I'd be happy to write a recommendation
40        letter for you↑ erm
41        (0.4)
42     S: ↑oh thank you
```

S gives as reason for her visit that she does not know how to write a recommendation letter for a department scholarship (lines 12-13) and requests P's advice how to go about it (lines 20-21). In response to P's candidate understanding that S *wants* a letter (line 22), S elaborates her earlier request for advice how to write a letter herself (lines 24-27). At that point P initiates an insert expansion that treats S's understanding that *she* has to write the letter as a misunderstanding, first by correcting S's understanding of who "usually" writes the letter for the indicated purpose (lines 28-29) and then, when S does not respond, by repeating a version of her (P's) earlier candidate understanding (line 31). After a considerable delay in which S may be "thinking about" what she just heard, S confirms P's understanding (line 33). In a "non-minimal post-expansion" (Schegloff 2007: 149), P reformulates her earlier explanation of who writes the letter in a version that specifically refers to the situation at hand: "you don't have to write (0.3) it I write it" (lines 34-35). This version gets a claim of changed understanding from S (line 36) and a sequence-closing exchange that also completes the insert sequence. In next turn P grants the request for a letter.

S's understanding that *she* has to write the recommendation letter can be taken to show that she misunderstood the roleplay instructions ("ask for a recommendation letter"). In P's managing of S's misunderstanding, however, P consistently remains within the roleplay frame. P accomplishes this by treating S's misunderstanding as showing a gap in her institutional membership knowledge rather than a problem of vocabulary or reading comprehension. P's corrective informings in the insert expansion (lines 28-29, 34-35) are designed to realign S's knowledge of writing a recommendation letter as an institutional activity that is bound to the category of professor not student.

The excerpts in this section have illustrated various ways in which the student-participants orient to the portion of the roleplay setup that pertains to requesting a recommendation letter. The final section will show how the participants invoke the stipulation that the letter is due within a week.

6.1.3 Invoking the due date

The roleplay instructions to the student-participants describe the due date as a predicate of the recommendation letter ("The letter is due in one week."), while the instructions to the participant enacting the professor direct him or her to "inform the student that you will write the letter and ask when the due date is, if the student doesn't tell you." We will examine how the participants

orient to these specifications and transform them into sequentially ordered actions.

Excerpts 6 and 7 P show how S informs P of the due date following S's request for the letter.

Excerpt 6   ID 9

```
9      P: what can I do for you today=
10     S: =thank you for sparing the time for me=
11     P: =sure
12     S: I: would like- (0.2) you to write a (.) recommendation
13        (.) letter for the (0.5) department scholarship↑
14     P: uh huh↑
15        (0.5)
16  →  S: and I'm I'm I have to apologize the (0.7) the
17        letter is due on (0.7) in this in one week °so:°
18     P: °oh: yeah↑°
19     S: °I have to° (0.8) uh: (0.7) °I- I'd like to I would
20        like you to (.) write (0.7) it in short time°
21     P: yeah: u̲hm because I'd be happy to write the
22        recommendation letter for you ((continues))
```

Excerpt 7   ID 14

```
9      S: hhhh (0.6) °okay° (0.6) uh so to̲day uhm (0.9)
10        I wanna ask you to write↑
11     P: uh huh↑
12     S: uhm: recommendations for e- (0.4) as a exchange n̲o
13        not exchange international student=
14     P: =uh huh
15        (0.8)
16  →  S: so: .hh but uh actually (0.7) the due (0.3) i:s uhm
17        (2.4) uh next Friday so (1.2) <just [one wee:k>
18     P:                                    [mm::
19        (1.7)
20     S: °yea:h° =
21     P: =so well I'm happy to write the letter.
22     S: okay thank you
```

In both excerpts S shows through the prosodic format of the request turn that their request for a letter is not complete, and P indicates with continuers

(line 14) that P is expecting further details before responding to the request. In next turn S informs P of the due date through practices that push the time formulations towards the end of the turns (lines 15 to 17): inter-turn gaps of silence, turn-initial and turn-internal perturbations, self-repairs, an apology in Excerpt 6, and a disalignment marker ("actually", Clift 2001) in Excerpt 7. Also in both excerpts, S characterizes the time frame as brief and treats the short notice as problematic by saying it softly (Excerpt 6, lines 19-20) and with slower speed (Excerpt 7, line 17). With the clusters of delay practices and semiotic resources S shows that she interprets the due date in the role-play instructions as a high contingency that lessens her entitlement to the letter (Curl and Drew 2008). In either case P grants the request in the next topical turn.[7]

In a substantial number of cases, S completes the request without informing P of the due date, and P grants the request. In those instances some of the students show their orientation to the roleplay instructions by bringing up the due date as their next action, typically in a delayed and but-prefaced turn that treats the due date as a high contingency ("but< the due date is just one week from now so:"/"uhm but the the letter due is only one week↑ so I'm kind of rushing?"). When S does not inform P of the due date in first position P orients to the roleplay instructions and inquires, as below.

Excerpt 8   ID 20
```
4        P:  what can I do for you
5        S:  Ah:m I- (.) I plan to apply (0.2) the international
6            student scholarship=
7        P:  =Mm
8        S:  and I nee:d a letter (.) recommendation letter
9        P:  Mm↑hm
10       S:  so could y-you write me >could you write< it for me?
11       P:  Yes: I'd be happy to=
12       S:  =°uh huh°
13           (2.3)
14  →    P:  Can I ask uh when the letter is due?
15       S:  ah: it's due in one week
16           °hmm°
17       P:  (2.0)
```

---

7 The delays may foreshadow P's informing S of P's contingency (P's travel schedule).

Excerpt 9 ID 20

```
6      P:  what can I do for you
7      S:  yea(h)h hhh I have a question about a uhm (.)
8          recommendation letter=
9      P:  =↑hm=
10     S:  =cause ah: I was going to (0.3) uhm I'm going to
11         apply (0.3) for a department scholarship
12     P:  Uh↑huh
13         (0.3)
14     S:  so: uh I wonder if you can write a recommendation
15         letter for me
16     P:  Yes yes >I'd be happy to<
17     S:  hh thank yo(h)u hhh
18     P:  >sure sure sure< yes
19         (0.8)
20  →  P:  uh what do I need to know about the letter
21         for example:: when is it due
22         (0.8)
23     S:  uh: next week
24     P:  °↑hm°
25         (0.8)
```

After completion of the request sequence P inquires about the due date, following inter-turn gaps of silence and delays within the question turn. In Excerpt 8 the question proper comes after a question preface, in Excerpt 9 it comes as a specific second question that narrows down a general first version. With the inter-turn and intra-turn delays, P indexes the due date inquiry as dispreferred, that is, as an action that diverges from the normatively expected course of action (Pomerantz and Heritage 2012; Schegloff 2007). Specifically, the formulations of P's inquiries make relevant S's category-bound epistemic obligation to provide P with the required information when it is sequentially expected. S's responses show that they understood the due date specification in the roleplay instructions but may not have inferred that they are expected to deliver the information without being solicited to do so. Providing the information in second position facilitates S's turn production because their response necessarily operates on the format of P's inquiry, as the

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7 The delays may foreshadow P's informing S of P's contingency (P's travel schedule).

responses do here with pronominal reference and ellipsis. Neither student shows any explicit recognition of the high contingency that the short notice implies.

Some students proceed to other details regarding the letter before informing P of the due date. In those events P expressly formulates the normative sequential order of actions.

Excerpt 10   ID 68

```
7   S:  Mr. Brown uh uh- actually I have a uh request
8       for a recommendation letter?
9   P:  hmm↑=
10  S:  =I'm trying to get scholarship from department
11      (0.5)
12  P:  >sure no probl[em<
13  S:               [>I was wondering if you can< (.) thank you
14  P:  >I'd be happy to<
15  S:  thank you (.) ah and (1.0) it's uh (1.3) uh it's- you
16      can but- both submit it in letter or electronically so
17      >whatever you want< I can give you the envelope to submit
18      it with address and everything?
19      (0.7)
20  P:  Uh::: well- uh before that can you tell me when the
21      letter is due
```

Excerpt 11 ID 62

```
8      S:  I need some uh (1.0) uh help from you?
9          (0.5)
10     S:  uh: (1.0) I need a (0.7) uh: (1.7) a
11         recommendation letter because I saw-
12         I applied for the the scholarship uh:
13         (2.0)
14     P:  the (.) the department scholarship=
15     S:  =yeah
16         (.)
17     S:  °yeah yeah°
18         (0.5)
19     P:  happy to (.) happy to write no problem yes
20         >°write the letter°<
21     S:  okay uh: (0.7) but
22         (2.0)
23   → S:  it better for me uh to submit uh on e-mail or
```

```
24        just bring uh hard drop hard copy for you ()
25   P: we:ll de- depends u:hm I wonder (0.5)
26        can you tell me whe:n the letter is due?
```

After the successful request sequence, S moves on to ask P about his pre-
ferred delivery option for the letter. S's question invokes the roleplay instruc-
tions, which however stipulate that the submission modality be brought up
after other details, including the due date, have been cleared. Instead of an
answer, P launches an insert expansion in which he asks for the due date. In
Excerpt 10, P formulates the due date as information that needs to be pro-
vided before the question of delivery option can be addressed ("before that
can you tell me when the letter is due.") In Excerpt 11, P formulates the due
date as a condition for deciding on the delivery mode ("de- depends."").
Through various delay practices, P orients to the delivery mode question as
sequentially displaced and derailing the progressivity of the talk. In fact, in
these roleplays the talk never does get back to the topic of delivery mode, and
the second pair part remains pending (i. e., P never answers the question of
whether they prefer to submit the letter as hardcopy or by email).

Finally, in Excerpt 12, following the completed request sequence S starts a
post-completion expansion that is also taken as problematic by P.

Excerpt 12   ID 32
```
14 S: yeah so: I want to ask you to write a recommendation
15     letter for me
16 P: I'd be HAPpy to
17     (0.7)
18 S: uh::
19 P: no problem
20     (0.5)
21 S: yea:h
22     (0.4)
23 S: uh maybe you could write somethi:ng about me
24     say some good things
25 P: ah there's plenty of good things to say [about you
26 S:                                          [hhhhh
27 P: don't worry hhh
28 S: uh: (.) a:nd (0.4) uh maybe you can mention that my
29     course project with you (0.3) [my research thing=
30 P:                                [mmm
```

```
31 P:  =mmm:
32 S:  yeah=
33 P:  =yeah sure we can I can >I can< (0.3) I can
34     talk about the (.) content of the letter with you
35     (0.3)
36 S:  mmhmm=
37 P:  =eh: maybe a bit later one thing I do wanna know
38     i:s (.) uh whe:n (0.5) do you need the letter (0.4)
39     finished (0.5) [when's the due date
40 S:                 [uhm:
```

When P is withholding a substantive turn after the completed request exchange, S launches a series of suggestions (line 23) of what P might write in the letter. With the suggestions S appears to elaborate the stipulation from the roleplay that S is currently taking a course from P (lines 28-29). P rebuffs these suggestions, first in a humorous way (lines 25-27); then, when S shows no recognition of the rejection (28-29), with a pro forma acceptance in which P emphasizes his authorship of the letter (33-34); and finally by closing the topic down with reference to its untimeliness ("maybe a bit later", 37). With the preface to his next action, "one thing I do wanna know", P implicitly contrasts the relevance of the upcoming question about the due date with the irrelevance of S's suggestions regarding the content of the letter. In this way P frames the due date as information that S should have provided without being asked and treats the unsolicited suggestions about the content of the letter as category-incongruent.

This section has shown that the students register the due date specification in the roleplay instructions but invoke it at different sequential positions, with markedly different interactional consequences. P's responses display their normative expectation that S deliver the due date informing in first position. When S does not take the expected initiative, P produces inquiries as dispreferred actions that treat S's absent informings as relevant absences. Similarly, when S moves on to other details regarding the recommendation letter before informing P of the due date, P treats these actions as sequentially misfitting.

7 Discussion and conclusion

This study has documented how the participants in a roleplay designed for pragmatic assessment in an EAP context orient to the roleplay setup and

jointly transform descriptions and instructions into the stipulated activity. We have examined how the parties take up their assigned identities as student and professor as they manage three specifications from the setup – the overall activity as an academic consultation, requesting and granting a recommendation letter, and the due date for the letter. The participants invoked, elaborated, and disregarded the setup in ways that exhibited their understanding of the roleplay specifications. These understandings, as well as the parties' accomplishment of the activity from moment to moment, displayed their sequential and categorial competences in the activity context of academic consultation. The mutually elaborative back-and-forth between categorial and sequential relations, proposed by Watson (1997) and fully taken onboard by contemporary developments in membership categorization analysis (Bushnell 2014; Fitzgerald and Housley 2015), was in evidence as the participants advanced through the activity: for instance, the availability check and inquiry into the reason for the visit in the opening, the partitioning of the interlocutors into requester and granter of a recommendation letter, and the consequentiality of (not) informing the interlocutor of the due date or making suggestions about the content of the letter. Both participants showed through their responses that the other party's talk was category-congruent and delivered in a sequentially fitting way. However only the professor located in the student's talk (a) understanding problems that showed a lack of institutional knowledge, and actions that were (b) relevantly absent, (c) sequentially misplaced, and (d) category-incongruent.

Our analysis has shown how evaluations of the parties' conduct are endogenous to the interaction, that is, they are the participants' evaluations not ours as analysts. This is an uncommon posture in language assessment. However our stance is consistent with what is known as "ethnomethodological indifference" (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970), that is, bracketing analysts' preoccupations and instead paying close attention to the parties' sequential and categorial practices. The analytical posture of nonjudgmental attention to the participants' talk also extends to the roleplay setup. Our interest has focused on how the parties recruit, transform, and disregard the roleplay specifications and how the setup thereby becomes procedurally consequential for the interaction.

A clear outcome of the analysis is that for the participants not all roleplay specifications are equal. Through their interactional conduct the parties show which details from the setup are necessary, optional, and dispensable *for them*. All dyads treat their category incumbencies as acquainted student and professor and the setting 'academic consultation' as indispensable and mutually constitutive. The great majority of students also take from the instructions the

stipulation to request a recommendation letter and selectively recruit one or more of the descriptions to characterize the purpose of the letter. If the student does not make the request, or if the request is not for the professor to write a letter, or if the student does not describe the purpose of the letter, the professor treats these nonoccurrences as relevant absences through other-initiations of repair or addresses them as gaps in the student's institutional knowledge. Similarly, when students do not inform the professor of the due date for the letter in first position, the professor solicits the missing information. In this event the format of P's due date inquiry treats S's outstanding informing as an unfulfilled epistemic obligation to provide the required information when it is sequentially expected.

Other specifications in the setup are disregarded by most students and recruited for the interaction by others. Some students transform the stipulation that P is meeting S outside their office hours into an appreciation, which P then aligns with. If S does not orient to this situational detail there are no visible consequences. Lastly, some descriptive details never surface in the talk (the reason for the meeting taking place outside of office hours; how long S has known P; S not being P's advisee but currently taking P's class).

From the participants' differential orientations to the roleplay setup, it is apparent that the setup as exogenous context is not determinative of the inter-action. Zimmerman and Boden's (1991) remarks about the relation of setting and interaction in the study of institutional talk apply to the special case of roleplay as well:

> measurement of "institutional setting" as the "independent" variable is irremediably confounded with measurement of "configuration of talk" as the dependent variable. Consequently, the relationship between the two is, from a structural-equation point of view, entirely circular, and any model involving it is hopelessly underidentified. From an ethnomethodological perspective, the relation is necessarily reflexive, where such reflexive relations are not a methodological nuisance but an essential property of social action (Zimmerman and Boden 1991: 20).

In other words, through their coordinated actions and action formation, the participants continuously *generate* the setting, in the case of the EAP roleplays their incumbencies in the institutional categories of student and professor and the activity of academic consultation. The researcher's charge, then, in analyz-ing interaction in real-world institutional settings or in roleplay, is to demon-strate in the details of the talk what features of the setting become relevant and procedurally consequential (Schegloff 1991) for the participants at particular interactional moments. As our analysis has shown, this analytical stance affords

a critical view of the local endogenous order of roleplay as a device for knowledge generation, training, and assessment.

Lastly, we want to return to the disciplinary concern in language assessment to manage the opposing needs for authenticity and standardization in the design of its instruments. We noted above that the detailed specifications in the roleplay setup embody these concerns. One question that the findings of this study raise but do not answer is what to make of the scenic details that were consistently disregarded. For the participants, were these details noise or helpful contextualization that, although backgrounded in the interaction, made the setting "richer" and more plausible, and so supported the parties in achieving the activity? Comparative studies of roleplays with differentially elaborated setups would be useful to shed light on this design issue. Another important question is which of the setup specifications were managed differently by the student-participants and whether these differences were interpretable as indicating different levels of interactional pragmatic competence. While analysis of the request for a recommendation letter scenario offers preliminary support of this possibility (Youn 2015), no quantitative studies are available that specifically examine the relationship between a range of setup details and how these details surface or do not surface in the student-participants' talk. Future studies are recommended to explore whether analysis to this effect yields a useful index of interactional competence.

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