

The Communicative Value of In-Between Moments

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What is meant by “in-between moments” in the title of this paper are those times in our classrooms that teachers and students do not typically associate with learning per se. These liminal moments might include the teacher greeting and saying goodbye to the students, taking roll call, switching from one activity to another, or informal conversations during the lesson which are not directly connected to the pedagogical tasks at hand. They are frequently thought of as neglected crevices, not part of the lesson proper (Victoria, 2019, p. 186).

The notion of liminality in architecture is “a state of in-between, where the doorsteps and thresholds” serve as areas of transit connecting spaces of different usage (Ng & Lim, 2018, p. 81). Examples of such transitional spaces between two functional zones include corridors, lobbies, stairwells, or passages. Empty, bleak liminal spaces often evoke feelings of unease, nostalgia, or a sense of dislocation and isolation as the mind struggles to place them within a clear context. The presence of the mythical online Slender Man (Asimos, 2020) lurking in the background intensifies that discomfort, blending the eeriness of place with psychological disquiet (see Figure 1).

By synthesising ideas from theoretical and empirical research, this paper will argue that the neglected in-between moments can be turned into meaningful opportunities for learning. Everyday, dreary transitions can be transformed into colourful, creative, and fertile ground for building communicative competence in the language classroom (see contrast

between Figure 1 and Figure 2). The argument will be made by first looking at the various definitions of in-between moments, then outlining what takes place in these instances focusing particularly on the use of students' first language (L1) and the presence of humour. The paper will make the case that these liminal instances of L1 and humour can indeed be used to develop communicative competence. The article will end with practical implications for lesson planning.

Figure 1

Dreary Transition: Desolate Corridor With Slender Man (Perchance, n.d.)



Figure 2

Colourful Transition: Creative Language Classroom (Perchance, n.d.)



Definition of In-Between Moments

Defining in-between moments requires analysing how instructional time fluctuates. It is difficult to quantify exactly how much time is spent off-task during a lesson as off-task behaviour can vary depending on factors such as the classroom setting, the types of activities and their design, the gender of the pupils, and even the time of the school year, with on-task activity decreasing towards its end (Godwin et al., 2016). Research in elementary schools has found that learners spend between 10% and 50% of their time off-task (Godwin et al., 2016). Interestingly, in an English language classroom study conducted in Japan, Santos (2023) found that in some cases up to 71% of a pair work activity was spent in off-topic conversation in the students' L1 (Figure 3). The latter number, though perhaps not generalisable to other contexts, still makes one not only want to examine the notion of off-task liminal moments, but might also necessitate rethinking how teachers use pair work activities and what role the first language plays.

Figure 3

Percentage of Time Students Spent Communicating Off-Task in L1 During a Pair-Work Activity in an English Lesson in Japan.



Note. Based on data from Santos (2023).

The first step in investigating the concept of liminal, in-between moments in the classroom is to formally define what we mean by it. Many terms can be used to describe these instances of communication including but not limited to *liminal moments*, *off-task talk* (OTT), *off-task behaviour*, *off-topic conversations*, *transitional phases*, *threshold experiences*, *shifts in engagement*, *turning points*, *side-tracking*, and *pedagogical shifts*. This multitude of terminology points to the complexity of the notion and the difficulties in pinning down a clear definition. In determining the specific meaning of the concept, this paper will approach the matter from several different aspects, namely:

1. the mode of interaction (pedagogic vs. natural),
2. the setting (institutional vs. informal),
3. the goal (learning vs. socialising),
4. the task (on-task vs. off-task),
5. the topic (on-topic vs. off-topic), and
6. the structure (initiation–response–feedback vs. spontaneous, unstructured talk).

In the following sections, each of the above points will be discussed separately, though it is important to note that these are simply different perspectives of looking at the same phenomenon. There are naturally overlaps between the different angles of the definition of in-between moments. The number of the heading corresponds to the number of the points.

1. Modes of Interaction in the Language Classroom

Gil (2002), citing in her arguments Krashen and Terrell (1983) as well as Widdowson (1978), claimed that communicative language teaching “considers the classroom a place where students learn to communicate through communication” (p. 273) making exposure to and use of the target language (L2) a key factor in successful language learning. In line with this, Ellis (2005) emphasised the importance of maximising L2 input. Accordingly, Gil

(2002) asserted that the language in the classroom should emulate as much as possible the language used outside the classroom.

This interpretation of communicative language teaching sets up a false opposition between the natural mode of communication taking place outside the classroom and the pedagogic mode of communication within the classroom. The natural mode focuses on the meaning with language serving as the means of communication. In this mode, we are teaching *through* the language. Conversely, the pedagogic mode focuses on form with language being the object of communication, hence we are teaching *about* the language. Yet, this static dichotomy fails to capture the “dynamics of foreign language classroom discourse” (Gil, 2002, p. 274) where language is not only the content and the object of communication, but also the means and medium of communication. The language classroom offers a unique opportunity to fuse the two modes demonstrating their overlap (Figure 4) with language learning and language use taking place simultaneously (Illés & Akcan, 2017).

Figure 4

The Overlap Between the Pedagogic and the Natural Modes



Note. Adapted from Gil (2002, p. 276).

To demonstrate the bridging of the two modes, Gil (2002, p. 276) provided the following example of an exchange between a teacher and a student taking place while the topic of phrases with the verbs “do” and “make” was covered:

Line and Speaker	Discourse Outcome	Mode
1 T:	Give an example please	Pedagogic
2 S1:	I did my homework	Pedagogic/Natural
3 Ss:	Ohhhh	Natural

Here we can see that the teacher starts the exchange in the pedagogic mode focusing on the verb “do” and asking the student to provide an example. The student in turn provides an example which not only accomplishes the task set by the teacher (pedagogic mode) but simultaneously engages the student’s own reality by providing a genuine answer (natural mode). This switch in mode is recognised by the rest of the students, who interpret the answer of Student 1 as an attempt to show off, and they in turn react in the natural mode by teasing her with “Ohhhh”. This seemingly simple exchange illustrates the underlying complexities of the communication in the language classroom and the inability of the reductionist pedagogic–natural dichotomy to capture the multitude of fluid conversational goals.

Returning to the definition of in-between moments, in terms of modes, the liminal instances occur when modes mingle, that is, when there is a natural utterance within a pedagogic exchange as in the example above, or vice versa when there is pedagogic talk during a natural conversation. Indeed, liminal spaces could provide opportunities for “incidental focus-on-form ... as when a teacher overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (Long, 1991, as cited in Hawkes, 2023, p. 38). When viewed in this light, liminal moments gain a special significance through their power to bridge the divide between

the two modes and their ability to encapsulate multiple goals in a single exchange. In-between moments underscore the fact that the two modes are complementary (Gil, 2002).

2. Ramifications of the Institutional Setting of the Language Classroom

Language instruction mostly takes place in an institutional setting, be it a school, university, or language centre. Consequently, the institution endows the teacher with certain rights including directing the flow of conversation and controlling who speaks when, but also what to talk about and in what language. Even in private one-on-one language lessons, during which the learner may have more opportunities to speak up, there is still an innate power imbalance between the instructor and the learner.

Yet, the unique context of the language classroom, where the language is both the medium and content of instruction and where the students' ability to communicate is key, means that a more symmetrical relationship where students have more talking rights may result in a better environment for learning (Gil, 2002, pp. 277–278). This puts teachers in a situation where they have a dual role as both an authority and a facilitator (O'Dwyer, 2006): They have the speaking rights but need to relinquish some of these rights to enable the learning of the students and enhance their autonomy. In this student-centred approach, teachers play both the role of “actor and stage-manager” (Gil, 2002, p. 278), simultaneously participating in the conversation and directing it. Due to this complexity, some teachers may opt out of the actor role retaining the authority to limit students' contributions (Gil, 2002).

Additionally, the institutional setting dictates that in communicative language learning the teacher not only controls the flow of conversation and speaking rights but serves as an intellectual authority conveying knowledge and modelling language to provide L2 input (O'Dwyer, 2006). Teachers need to have a unique skill to communicate English as ‘comprehensible input’ to students, using language that is understandable yet challenging,

effectively tuning the complexity to the students' levels (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Teachers' input gains in significance in contexts where the students' exposure to the L2 out of the classroom may be limited or hard to come by, although this may be rare in the age of the internet.

However, O'Dwyer (2006) argued that teachers need to not only serve as a model of linguistic practice, but they also need to support the students' learning process by providing instructions, corrections, and evaluations of the students' progress towards their learning goals. This ability "to refer to and articulate such standards" (O'Dwyer, 2006, p. 10) of evaluation and supervision of progress reinforces the teachers' authority, putting them and the students in a master–apprentice relation. As a result, the teachers' role in a cooperative, communicative language learning process is further complicated as they navigate the balancing of their authority with the students' autonomy.

This is where the opportunities for balance that in-between moments provide come into play. In terms of the institutional setting, liminal communication is when teachers allow informal conversation to take place in a formal context. Such conversations with students offer teachers a chance to engage with learners in genuine informal communication while retaining the right to steer the flow of conversation towards learning goals. Thus, in in-between moments teachers can provide not only comprehensible input through informal communication (focus on meaning, relinquishing authority), but also input on correctness (focus on form, retaining authority).

3. Implications of Multiple Goals in the Language Classroom

Students can pursue various goals in the language learning process. As previously mentioned, in the natural mode of communication in the classroom their goals tend to be social, not educational, whereas in the pedagogic mode their goals are more steered towards

learning itself (Gil, 2002). Nevertheless, these goals are complementary and can overlap. Indeed, L2 learners are “capable of orienting to multiple speech exchange systems and agendas at the same time” (Barkaoui et.al., 2008, p. 34), and dealing with varied “discursive activity allows learners to become proficient learners of the foreign language” (Gil, 2002, p. 278). In in-between moments, in addition to achievement goals, students bring into the classroom goals from their everyday lives like having fun, socialising, or making friends. At any given time, students pursue several goals simultaneously. Students come to school seeking knowledge, social belonging, and personal connections that support both learning and friendships (Hofer, 2007; Kilian et al., 2010). In-between moments provide an intersection of the pedagogic and natural modes where students can multitask and multigoal, allowing learners to focus on academic aims in a convivial atmosphere and vice versa; they can practise real-world interaction within the confines of the classroom. This form of multiple intentionality is a key feature of genuine communication which students need to master in order to grow into accomplished L2 users, as seen in the above example by Gil (2002, p. 276).

In an interesting small-scale study, Serra de Lemos and Gonçalves (2004) conceptualised goals not just as attributes of individuals, but as projects between people and their environment emphasising the mutual influences and relationships of individuals and situations. They claimed that “within the real classroom context, as students encounter situations implying new demands and new opportunities, diverse and multiple goals are potentially elicited” (Serra de Lemos & Gonçalves, 2004, p. 198). The results of the study indicate that students can have multiple goals simultaneously and that goal management is dynamic (emergent, shifting) rather than static. Serra de Lemos and Gonçalves concluded, among other things, that teachers need to design classroom practices that support students’ capacity to manage multiple goals. In the light of this, the significance of liminal moments

grows as they offer an opportunity for the coexistence of multiple goals, including academic ones in the pedagogic mode and social ones in the natural mode.

4. In-Between Moments as a Reflection of Focus on Task

Off-task talk (OTT) is increasingly recognised as a meaningful resource that facilitates language acquisition and meaning negotiation (Stone, 2019), highlighting the importance of investigating in-between moments through the prism of OTT. In order to fully analyse OTT, it is first necessary to define a task. One often cited definition within the scope of ELT is that put forward by Ellis (2003):

A task is a work-plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. (p. 16).

In terms of what constitutes OTT, Barkaoui et al. (2008) defined “OTT as ‘off-topic talk’ ... not exclusively and directly related to the overall topic and purposes of ... the task at hand” (p. 36). To avoid the circularity of this definition, it might help to look at OTT as part of wider off-task behaviour linking it to attention and time devoted to the task itself.

Kilian et al. (2010) and Hofer (2007) claimed that off-task behaviour is comprised of activities not aimed at learning, which links this type of conduct to the natural mode of communication. As discussed above, students bring into class many different goals, and when they pursue the ones which are not directly related to the task at hand, it constitutes off-task behaviour (Kilian et al., 2010, p. 501). Additionally, off-task behaviour occurs when there is

a switch in activity during the lesson, that is, when the students' focus turns from one goal to another giving rise to liminal episodes. This switch happens when there are two or more goals competing for the students' attention, when the temptation of the competing goal is high, or when the students come across a problem during the task. According to Barkaoui et al. (2008) and Markee (2005), off-task episodes can happen when the teacher redirects the students' attention from one topic or task to a new one but has not yet fully started the new task. This creates an interactional gap where off-task behaviour can take place and the learners can not only engage in OTT, but they can usurp the teacher-typical role of initiator in communication. There will be further details on this in the section below, which discusses the initiation–response–feedback structure.

Given the fact that OTT occurs in the switch between tasks and may be student initiated, some teachers view it as a discipline problem and discourage it. Nevertheless, it could be the case that some students engage in OTT not because they want to disturb the lesson but because the competing off-task, noncurricular goal is of higher importance to them (Kilian et al., 2010; Hofer, 2007). Indeed, OTT in liminal moments might not necessarily result in misbehaviour because even though “the content of off-task episodes may not be related to the task, the act or action of going off-task itself is necessary for sustaining the activity” (Barkaoui et al., 2008, p. 48). Paradoxically, OTT in some instances may be an integral part the task itself. By allowing students the opportunity to attend to the social and affective needs of their group, OTT can build group cohesion in collaborative learning, thereby serving as a social lubricant leading to and supporting task achievement.

That being said, there is evidence that if OTT is frequent and initiated by one particular student, it can disturb the lesson and detract from the learning outcomes (Sharma, 2015) by decreasing the actual time spent on the academic task. This time devoted to the completion of the task is part of the academic learning time (ALT) which is defined as the

“proportion of instructional time allocated to a content area during which students are actively and productively engaged in learning” (Gettinger & Seibert, 2002, p. 774). It follows that excessive OTT for extended amounts of time may have a negative impact on achieving the desired learning outcomes of the lesson and can be counterproductive to students’ progress (Sharma, 2015).

On the other hand, Stone (2019) challenged the traditional view that OTT hinders learning, highlighting that such interactions offer valuable learning moments because they are initiated by learners themselves, hold personal significance, involve genuine negotiation of meaning, and promote reflection on language use. Furthermore, Barkaoui et al. (2008) argued that narrowly defining OTT by the content of what the students are saying is misleading because the functions of their utterances may in fact support the overall aim of the task by strengthening the students’ relationships in the service of the task. These perspectives suggest that rather than being disruptive, OTT in liminal moments can play a constructive role in facilitating engagement, collaboration, and deeper understanding within the learning process.

5. Topic as an Indicator of In-Between Moments

The notions of topic and task within the language classroom context are very closely related. Many authors employ the terms off-topic and off-task talk interchangeably. Markee (2005), for example, even used the term ‘off-task topic talk’ (p. 204). This blurring of the boundaries of terminology underscores the fact that the definition sections of this paper are merely different angles of looking at the same phenomenon, and there are bound to be overlaps. Still, it can be argued that there is a slight, though meaningful difference in the definitions of off-topic and off-task talk and their determination of what constitutes an in-between moment in language teaching and learning. The key lies in the difference between pragmatics and semantics. In Ellis’s (2003) definition of task previously cited, we saw that a

task “requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome” (p. 16). This entails that when defining a task, we are interested in the function, goal, and pragmatic meaning of what is being said. On the other hand, in this paper, the term topic is defined in terms of its semantic meaning or content “vis-à-vis other topics” (Markee, 2005, p. 198) in the sequence of the exchange. This is based on Schegloff’s (1979) use of the term topic to refer to “what is talked about through some series of turns” (p. 270) and Markee’s (2005) use to refer to “whatever members understand the current conversation to be about” (p. 198).

Consequently, in-between moments are off-topic in the sense that they diverge from the flow of the conversation. Liminal instances break conversational coherence and semantic relevance, meaning that the talk is detached from the topic that immediately precedes or follows it. However, the pragmatic goals of such exchanges could support the overall aim of the pedagogic task by building rapport between learners so that they can more efficiently attend to the task and even more importantly by bringing real-life conversation into the classroom. For example, when a learner asks a peer during a task which of them will take notes, technically the utterance is semantically off-topic (breaking the conversational flow of topics), but pragmatically on task (serving to aim of the activity). Equally, if a student invites a peer to a party during a pedagogic task in L2, the exchange is both off-topic and off-task. Yet, even in this latter instance the learners’ private, natural exchange during a pedagogic task could be viewed as serving the general aim of the task because it turns the classroom into a venue for authentic, real-world interaction, which is the ultimate goal of communicative language teaching.

6. Stepping Outside of the I–R–F Structure

According to Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), the initiation–response–feedback (I–R–F) structure is the basic pattern of communication in the English language classroom, where a teacher initiates interaction (frequently with a question), a pupil responds, and the teacher follows with feedback (typically evaluative in nature). In terms of the mode of interaction, this type of exchange is pedagogic with a learning goal. In in-between moments, however, students can take on the teacher’s role of initiator in communication to engage in off-task or off-topic talk that has a natural, meaningful aim. As has already been said, in such liminal talk, learners step “outside the potentially constraining role of ‘student,’ whose classroom participation may often be limited to providing the response component of the initiation–response–feedback sequence” (Reddington, 2015, p. 33) in order to engage in ordinary conversation in the classroom (Waring, 2013). By exiting the preplanned I–R–F cycle (Illés & Akcan, 2017) and taking unsolicited turns, students “display their interactional competence and understanding of the interactional routine” (Jawhar, 2018, p. 307). Achieving interactional competence is one of the main aims of language teaching (Kramsch, 1986), and if engaging in liminal, natural, out-of-turn conversation helps to achieve this aim, students should be encouraged to do so.

Characteristics of In-Between Moments

Following the discussion of the various definitions of in-between moments and the analysis of liminal instances from several different angles, it is time to take a look at what teachers actually do during these intervals and what the features of these natural exchanges in the classroom are. This section will deal with two characteristics of in-between moments, namely the use of the students’ first language (L1) and the use of humour.

The Use of the Students' L1 During In-Between Moments

As noted above, Santos (2023) found that students in a Japanese context spent up to 71% of the time talking off-topic in their first language necessitating a deeper analysis of why exactly students felt the need to use their first language so extensively and what the functions that the first language fulfils are. In the study, Santos concluded that students used their L1 in order to clarify vocabulary, to manage the task, and for off-task talk (p. 185). Additionally, the teacher also used the L1 to start the lesson, for the roll call, and to end the lesson. In another study in the Japanese context, Stone (2019) found that students used their L1 to scaffold the learning of L2 through strategies such as translation of an unknown word, a placeholder for words they did not know, to ask for help, and to confirm understanding. Thus, the students used their L1 to repair communication breakdown, thereby facilitating learning and enabling them to return to the use of the L2. In other words, careful and limited use of the L1 can support, rather than obstruct, L2 acquisition.

The fact that judicious use of the L1 can be supportive of L2 learning was also reinforced by Alegría de la Colina and del Pilar García Mayo (2009), who claimed that “the use of the L1 provides learners with cognitive support that allows them to analyse language and perform tasks at a higher level than they would be able to in the L2” (p. 327). Since students may lack the linguistic tools to reflect higher level reasoning, they resort to the use of their L1 to verbalise complex cognitive processes. Alegría de la Colina and del Pilar García Mayo’s findings indicate that there are three broad categories of L1 use in the language classroom, which include the following:

1. Metacognitive talk – in which the students talked about the procedure or the instructions of the task, the management of the task, as well as about planning and monitoring the work.

2. Metatalk – whereby the learners used the L1 to discuss lexical and grammatical aspects of the L2.
3. Off-task talk – when the students engaged in casual conversation unrelated to the task.

In the study, one pair of student participants, during a text reconstruction task, spent 86% of the time engaging in L1 conversation, though this was almost exclusively on-task metacognitive and metatalk, contrary to Santos's (2023) high percentage of off-task L1 talk.

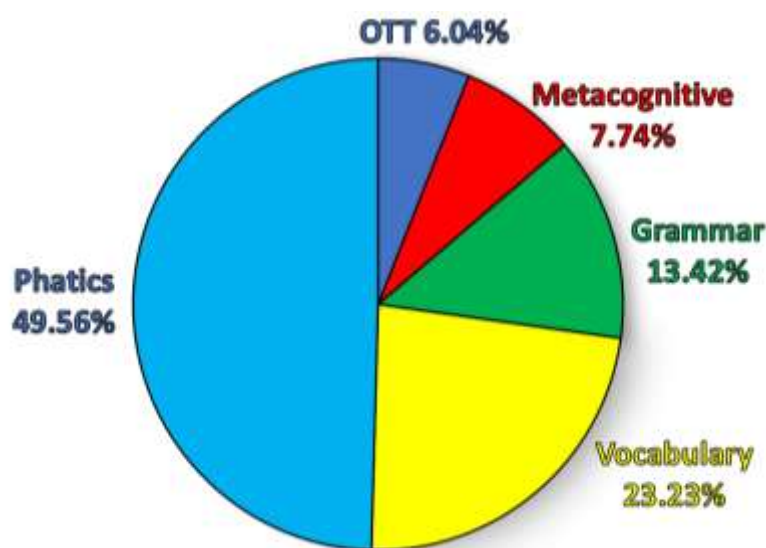
Other L1 functions in the language classroom have been identified although there is a large overlap with the three mentioned above. For example, Copland and Neokleous (2011) recognised 11 functions of L1, which, using the categorisation above, would be:

- logistics/organising, instructions (metacognitive);
- explaining/revising language skills and systems, question and answer, reprimands, praise, translating, providing hints (metatalk); and
- jokes, markers, giving opinions (off-task talk).

Similarly, Azkarai and del Pilar García Mayo (2015) found five categories of L1 functions: metacognitive talk, grammar talk, vocabulary talk, off-task talk, and phatics pertaining to expressions such as “ok” and “well” serving as social lubricants to create and maintain rapport. These phatics could also be seen as off-task talk because they serve a similar affective function to much of natural mode off-task talk. The overall distribution of L1 functions in Azkarai and del Pilar García Mayo's study is illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5

The Overall Distribution of L1 Functions



Note. Based on data from Azkarai and del Pilar García Mayo (2015, p. 559).

If the phatics can be pooled together with the off-task talk due to their affective nature, it means that the L1 was used in the natural mode for over 55% of the time and in pedagogic mode 45% of the time—underscoring the social and emotional role that the L1 plays in liminal interaction, a finding that is also highlighted in Tsoi and Aubrey’s (2024) study on task engagement. They found that in pair work tasks, self-selected student pairs with a close bond were much more likely to switch to their L1 than teacher-assigned pairs. The learners used their L1 to signal solidarity, but also as a cognitive tool to discuss grammar and vocabulary, thereby “increasing the amount and quality of [language-related episodes]” (Tsoi & Aubrey, 2024, p. 47). This emphasises the important role that the students’ L1 plays within liminal moments. In fact, Hawkes (2023) argued that L1 off-task talk can be actually right on task since students use it for a wide range of task-oriented purposes like signalling the end of a topic and suggesting moving onto the next topic, discussing the sequence and topic of question-and-answer exchanges, and debating on how to proceed with the task.

Despite the affective and cognitive advantages of using the L1 in in-between moments, there can be some drawbacks to excessive use of the L1 in the language classroom. For instance, if we bear in mind that in order for successful L2 acquisition to occur, L2 “input should be supplied in sufficient quantity” (Krashen, 1982, p. 70), then it follows that overreliance on the L1 can hinder student achievement and progress. On the other hand, if the L1 is used predominantly in liminal moments and not as the main vehicle of learning, then it can open up the door to translanguaging, which is a dynamic multilingual practice that goes beyond traditional language boundaries (García & Wei, 2015). The process of translanguaging entails the flexible, fluid, and adaptive use of several languages by multilingual speakers. It is “the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages” (Otheguy et al., 2015, p. 283). For instance, rather than cleanly code-switching between distinct systems, a student might fluidly fuse a Hungarian word root with an English suffix, creating a hybrid utterance like “I’m tanulásing for the exam” or “I’m jövöking”. In these spontaneous moments, the learner ceases to treat Hungarian and English as separate languages, instead utilising them as a single, unified cognitive resource to optimise expression. Such translanguaging practice has the opportunity to thrive in liminal instances of communication in the language classroom where students pursue social communicative goals, freely initiating conversations in a natural mode outside pedagogic, institutional, national, and structural (I–R–F) constraints.

The Use of Humour During In-Between Moments

Apart from the use of the full linguistic repertoire, another characteristic of in-between moments is the frequent presence of humour. Humour can function both as an abrasive, divisive tactic and as a social lubricant and bonding strategy (Martineau, 1972). Within the collaborative language classroom, it tends to have the latter role providing a rich

resource for both teachers and students and improving the overall learning atmosphere (Dewaele et al., 2018). Teachers' measured use of humour can increase student engagement and interaction (Jawhar, 2018), simultaneously reducing learner anxiety (Tarone, 2000). In opposition to the notion of language classroom anxiety, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) introduced the term foreign language enjoyment, which is the "complex emotion, capturing interacting dimensions of challenge and perceived ability that reflect the human drive for success in the face of difficult tasks" (p. 242). By reducing anxiety and increasing foreign language enjoyment, humour can serve as a safe house, loosening the restrictions of the institutional norms and equalising the status of teachers and students resulting in increased trust and understanding (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011). In such a safe, enjoyable, and egalitarian space, student mistakes need not result in a loss of face (van Dam, 2002).

The use of humour in the language classroom can have many benefits (Neff & Dewaele, 2023). One of these benefits is that humour is "affectively charged" causing "emotional excitement" (Reddington, 2015, p. 32) in students, which can improve their memory of form and function as well as reinforce their retention of information (Schmidt & Williams, 2001; Victoria, 2019). Closely connected to the benefit of improved memory is the advantage in test preparation with the teachers' sense of humour being positively related to the students' test scores (Swanson, 2013). The affective nature of humour also means that it can have a positive impact on motivation (Dörnyei, 1994 as cited in Reddington, 2015) by establishing rapport, building group cohesion, and creating a playful engaging atmosphere where students are free to experiment. All of these benefits of humour mean that it provides a genuine learning opportunity for students where the "ha-ha can lead to aha!" (Garner, 2006, p. 177).

Additionally, humour mostly occurs spontaneously, outside the preplanned I-R-F structure, with students initiating exchanges. This means that humorous exchanges in the

classroom mirror authentic, often creative, and natural interaction that takes place outside the walls of the language classroom (Illés & Akcan, 2017). By engaging in such spontaneous communication, students develop the ability to take unsolicited turns which are relevant to the interaction, thereby improving “their interactional competence and understanding of the interactional routine” (Jawhar, 2018, p. 307). Furthermore, the use of humour can help to build students’ sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence (Victoria, 2019) by raising their awareness of how language operates in authentic social contexts. Irony, wordplay, implied meaning, and the flouting of norms sharpen learners’ ability to interpret and produce socially and contextually appropriate language.

This is closely linked to the claim that the meaning-making as well as the multiple levels of construction and interpretation of humour can help to build students’ symbolic competence (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011). Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) defined symbolic competence as “the ability to shape the multilingual game in which one invests—the ability to manipulate the conventional categories and societal norms of truthfulness, legitimacy, seriousness, originality—and to reframe human thought and action” (p. 664). Furthermore, according to Reddington (2015), Vega (1990) even suggested that humour could be considered a fifth component of communicative competence.

Nevertheless, there are some disadvantages to the excessive use of humour in the language classroom ranging from discipline problems to the teacher not being taken seriously with learners preferring their teacher to be spontaneous, but not a comedian (Neff & Dewaele, 2023). Also, lower-level students or younger learners may face difficulties in understanding more advanced and nuanced language play, which may make them feel left out (Neff & Dewaele, 2023). Likewise, Reddington (2015) pointed out that due to its spontaneous nature, humour can be difficult to transport to and implement in the classroom.

Let us turn now to how humour works as well as the types, levels, strategies, and examples of humour found in the language classroom. Humour works by playing with predictability and resolving incongruity (Reddington, 2015). It is interactionally achieved by setting up expectations and defeating them. This “pattern re-forming play disrupts familiar conventions, using recognisable sequences in novel ways” (Bell, 2012, p. 191). Clearly, there can be many types of humour in language teaching, for instance, anecdotes, one-liners, irony, puns, hyperbole, jokes, teasing, mocking, and language play (Bell, 2011; Jawhar, 2018; Reddington, 2015). Language play itself can function on many levels, moving from the smallest or narrowest to the largest or broadest; the levels include: phonological, morphological, lexical or semantic, syntactic or grammatical, textual, pragmatic, and cultural or social (Bell, 2012; Reddington, 2015). As far as the strategies are concerned, Bell (2012) distinguished between *play with* and *play in* the L2, “where the former deals with cases in which the language itself is manipulated for play, and the latter with instances in which the language is used to engage in play” (p. 191). These two strategies reflect the dual nature of the L2 in the language classroom (discussed in the definition sections above) where it is both the object of learning (*play with*) and the medium of learning (*play in*). Some examples will help to illustrate the levels and strategies of humour.

Example 1: In order to raise phonological awareness, the teacher deliberately mispronounces the word “bottle” as “bottom” contrasting a target phoneme with an absurd or taboo alternative to comic effect (Reddington, 2015, p. 29). This is an example of the *play with* language strategy as it manipulates the language itself. It takes place on several levels: The mispronunciation is on the phonological level, the meaning shift on the lexical and semantic level, and the inappropriateness of the word “bottom” on a cultural level. Humour here is used to boost the students’ memory of the correct pronunciation through the use of affective tactics.

Example 2: A beginner-level English student twisted the formulaic greeting “What’s up?” by asking “What’s down?”, making the question “sufficiently right to be acceptable but sufficiently wrong to cause amusement” (Bell, 2012, p. 199). Again, this is the *play with* language strategy, and it is at the lexical level.

Example 3: When introducing a new word, the teacher asks, “What do people do when they suffocate?” only for a student to retort “They suffer!” (Illés & Akcan, 2017, p. 7). In this fascinating example, the student is simultaneously *playing with* the language (because the two words on the lexical level sound close enough to be confused) and *playing in* the language (because on the pragmatic level the meaning of the answer is right on the dot).

Example 4: The teacher is explaining the custom of trick-or-treating when children on Halloween go from door to door asking for treats and playing a trick on people if they do not get any sweets. At this point, a student remarks that this is the same practice as the Mafia extorting protection money and threatening to burn down the business or break your legs if they do not get it (Victoria, 2019, p. 193). This is an example of *play in* the language at the sociocultural level with the student’s comment illustrating a real understanding of the situation. In this case, although the comment might seem to be off-task or off-topic, it is in fact right on task.

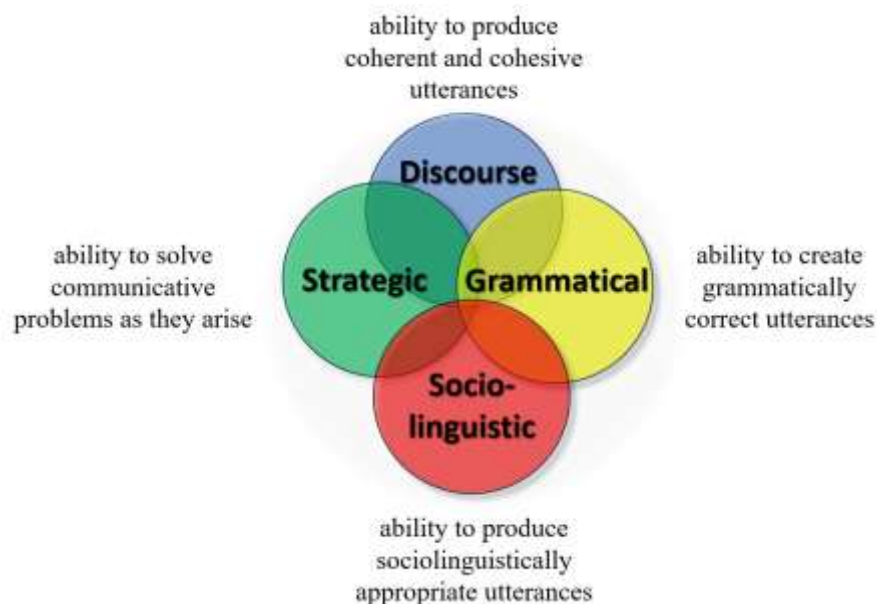
Harnessing In-between Moments to Build Communicative Competence

We have seen that communication in in-between moments in the language classroom is naturalistic; it is spontaneous by its very definition and nature; it helps to build symbolic competence; it is a form of genuine, authentic communication where students attend to everyday goals in addition to pedagogic ones; it offers opportunities for true-to-life humorous exchanges; it allows students to engage in the process of translanguaging where they can use all their linguistic resources; it provides students room to engage in individual and mutual

meaning-making; it makes it possible for learners to exploit language, often creatively, as a multilingual resource. Given all this, it can be postulated that communication in in-between moments in language teaching and learning helps to build communicative competence. As previously mentioned, humour, in particular, has been viewed by Vega (1990, as cited in Reddington, 2015) as the fifth element of communicative competence. She adopted the model developed by Canale and Swain (1980), building upon their four subcompetencies illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Subcompetencies of Communicative Competence



Note. Based on Canale and Swain (1980).

Canale and Swain (1980) built on the notion of communicative competence, which can be traced back to Hymes's (1972) original formulation. While Canale and Swain viewed the concept of communicative competence through the lens of language learning, Hymes's broader perspective focuses on language use by people in social contexts. According to him, communicative competence needs to account for:

Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible. Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available.

Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated. Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails.

(Hymes, 1972, p. 281)

What this means for the current discussion of in-between moments is that by engaging in naturalistic and spontaneous communication, language learners gain and develop the skills to form sentences and utterances that are:

- | |
|--|
| 1. formally possible – which could be practised by <i>playing with the language</i>; |
| 2. feasible in terms of the available means at the learners’ disposal – which could be scaffolded by judicious L1 use and translanguaging, allowing learners to use all their linguistic resources; |
| 3. appropriate to the social situation – which could be fostered by stepping outside purely pedagogical exchanges; |
| 4. actually performed – which could be brought to life by learners engaging in genuine interactional meaning-making and attending to naturalistic goals. |

Genuine, authentic communication in in-between moments in the classroom allows learners to acquire the skill of exploiting the L2 as a resource. By partaking in real-life exchanges within the pedagogic context, students can gain and practise the “competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner” (Hymes, 1972, p. 277). Such a bridging of pedagogic and natural aims helps students to develop a familiarity with what is formally possible with language while building an understanding of the social norms, roles, and expectations that govern communication in

everyday situations. Learners “are capable of orienting to multiple speech exchange systems and agendas at the same time”, which makes it possible for teachers to provide them with “hybrid contexts of talk” where ordinary conversations and institutional settings coexist (Markee, 2005, p. 211).

Implications for the Language Classroom

Given that liminal moments can provide opportunities for the classroom to become a venue for genuine communication, what are the implications for teaching? If “off-task interaction [is] just as valuable as on-task interaction” and “if the goal of task-based instruction is to engage learners in meaning-focused talk, does it matter whether what they actually talk about is on- or off-task?” (Markee, 2005, p. 212). When taken to the extreme, would this mean that we should dispense with the lesson plan altogether and just engage our students in ordinary conversation throughout our teaching? Such an idea might seem unreasonable, but in Hungary it happens frequently as general practice in some schools where native English speakers are charged with holding conversational classes while nonnative speaker language teachers are responsible for the teaching of grammar and form (Medgyes, 2017). This might not mean that the conversational classes have no lesson plan, but it does go against the main tenet of this paper that everyday communicative aims can go hand-in-hand with pedagogic ones with both taking place simultaneously in the language classroom. At the other extreme, we have teachers who over-plan, cramming every minute of the lesson with some activity, desperately trying to cover the material, finish the book, or prepare for the test leaving very little time if any for spontaneity. This is where informed lesson planning can help us achieve a balance between the two extremes through the intentional incorporation of liminality. Informed lesson planning means we should aim to:

- **Plan purposely** – This means we can take the authenticity of in-between moments and deliberately incorporate it into the main aims of the lesson. For this, teachers would have to know their students well. We saw that two characteristics of spontaneous natural communication in the language classroom are humour and the use of the L1. There is no reason why we should not intentionally capitalise on these two resources. There are countless internet and print materials on humour in the classroom. Two that can be highly recommended are Medgyes's (2002) exquisite and outstanding *Laughing matters: Humour in the language classroom* and *New ways in teaching with humour* edited by Rucynski (2017). On the L1 front, we can encourage students to engage in translanguaging by using all the languages they know as linguistic resources. Lesson plans can include communicative translation activities similar to those in Duff's (1989) *Translation: A resource book for teachers* or Albrecht's (2026) *Pedagogical Translation for Language Teaching*. An interesting method of combining translanguaging and humour is to build in exaggeratedly literal or unidiomatic mock translation tasks. Heward (2023), for example, discussed the use of mock translation of menus, a potentially fun and funny activity that activates both L1 and L2 language systems while focusing on the link between form and meaning (e.g., substituting "turkey breast" with "Turkish breast"). It is worth emphasising that humour and translanguaging activities should be carefully and deliberately selected and incorporated to support the learning aims and outcomes of the particular lesson at hand.
- **Plan loose** – This means not cramming every single minute of the lesson with an organised task. Teachers often feel compelled to have backup activities on the go, just in case students finish earlier than planned (Markee, 2005). Although this

might not be a bad idea, allowing students who have completed their task to engage in real-life conversation and attend to their social and affective needs could instead serve to strengthen bonds. Additionally, we can leave more space for administrative duties during the lesson such as greetings, roll call, setting homework, and switching from task to task. By chatting freely with students and showing genuine interest in what they are saying, teachers can make these moments conducive to social interaction serving as a platform for the intermingling of pedagogic and natural aims.

- **Plan for the unplanned** – It is obviously paradoxical to plan for spontaneity, but what is possible is to incorporate into future teaching elements of what has already occurred naturally in past lessons. This means having pen and paper ready to jot down topics, grammatical constructions, and vocabulary that have arisen naturally in liminal moments and then processing those valuable notes as resources for future lesson plans. If there is a lexical or grammatical unit coming up, teachers can refer back to the notes on unplanned interaction to see which of those resources can be recycled back into the planned lessons. Additionally, cross-referencing can also be an important scaffolding tool. When students use previously learned language elements during social interactions, highlighting those instances can help them bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world communication.

Through informed lesson planning and the bridging of the divide between pedagogic and natural communication, the often neglected, fleeting in-between moments could be transformed into colourful learning opportunities that build communicative competence.

Note: AI tools were employed in a limited capacity for image generation (Figures 1 and 2), identification of potential research sources, and minor text revisions.

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