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Language Learner Identities: Utilizing Conversation Analysis in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Conversation Analysis (CA), a method which studies and analyzes interaction has been used to study organizational structures of utterances, such as turn-taking, sequencing and repair practices. However, an area which is attracting attention is CA studies in the English language classroom, in particular, identities of language learners. Through examples of CA studies of interactions involving English language learners, the article discusses how using CA to analyze interactions in English language classroom can help address pedagogical issues surrounding the emergence of asymmetrical learner identities. The article concludes with the need to make CA available for more English language teachers as a vehicle to understand their students and their potential.

INTRODUCTION

Classroom discourse has evolved with changes in teaching and learning styles. The agents – namely, teacher and student – in the classroom and their identities in the classroom have been shaped by interactions unique to educational institutions. Influenced by a shift from a teacher-fronted, teacher-controlled style to an environment which promotes more student autonomy, the classroom identities have affected the dynamics between participants. One consequence has been the emergence of asymmetrical identities of the expert and the novice among students (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980; He, 2004; Kasper, 2004). When such identities are re-created among students, this may cause disharmony and disruption, resulting in an overall classroom environment not conducive for learning.

The implementation of communicative language teaching in the English language classroom in Japan, in addition to a personal interest in language learner identity revealed through Conversation Analysis (CA), has been my motivation in writing this paper. My exposure to CA and identities in interaction has given me a new perspective on my approach for teaching English. Consequently, this paper attempts to shed light on how issues in classroom interactions and environment can be addressed by studying the different classroom identities that emerge in small group dynamics.

I begin with an overview of the concept of language learner identity with an

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introduction of the contextual and social conceptualizations of language learning by Firth and Wagner (1997; 2007) in order to understand language learner identity in conjunction with the language acquisition process. Next, prefaced by a discussion on Membership Categorization Devices, as well as classroom discourse and identities, the paper examines classroom identities of English language learners through CA studies. Finally, the paper concludes by offering pedagogical implications on how identification of classroom identities can help teachers understand, as well as improve classroom interaction and teaching, by sharing the insights gained from the CA studies.

LANGUAGE LEARNERS, IDENTITIES AND TALK-IN-INTERACTION

Identities of Language Learners

In their influential articles, Firth and Wagner (1997; 2007) argue for the need to incorporate context and social interaction in language use in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Their discussion emphasizes how the prevalent cognitive theories of SLA at the time, by dichotomizing native- speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS), failed to address language learner issues described as follows:

> Rather than *talk*, we found *input*. Rather than *achievement*, we found an abundance of *problem-sources*. Rather than collaboration, invention, and an extraordinarily creative use of shared resources (which, to us, was *learning-in-action*), we found references to *errors, input modifications, interference*, and *fossilizations.* (Firth & Wagner, 2007, p.801)

In addition, the "standard identity categories of SLA" (Firth & Wagner, 2007, p.801) did not allow NNS participants to be studied with "an emic (i.e. participant-relevant) sensitivity towards fundamental issues" (Firth & Wagner, 1997, p.285; 2007, p.801). They add that not only did the participants have a role as an NNS or participant, but they also had an identity which is an "achieved feature of interaction" (p.801). Nevertheless, there may be some instances where language learners could be excluded from taking part in interaction because of their limited language abilities, which complicates the shaping of one's identity. This is because interacting in the social context is what is needed for language development, which consequently results in one's identity as a language learner.

Norton's (2000) conceptualization of the identity of the language learner draws on the arguments by Firth and Wagner (1997; 2007). For Norton (2000), identity refers to "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p.5). In addition, she argues that there is mutual constitution between language and the language learner identities. Norton, who conducted diary studies and interviews to immigrant women in Canada, concludes that understanding the identities of the language learners can provide insight into language learning and teaching.

Relevant to Japanese English learners, Kanno (2000; 2003) conducted a narrative inquiry study exploring language learners with Japanese returnee students, whose

education in the Japanese system is interrupted, usually due to a move to another country accompanying the expatriation of a parent. Kanno's (2000) study of the four returnees who lived in Canada focuses on the role L1 and L2 play on their bilingual and bicultural identities and suggests that the level of proficiency the returnees have in each language determines their identity as language learners.

Talk-in-interaction and CA

It may be helpful for English language teachers to be able to conduct some research of their own students to better understand the students and their identities and the resulting interactional issues. However, the methods described in the previous studies – narrative inquiry, diary studies, and interviews – may have little applicability in the classroom as they do not reveal any connections between the identities of the language learners and ways to improve their linguistic competence. However, CA is a hands-on method which can be used by classroom teachers to unveil what was not seen in conventional identity studies: the dynamic language learner identities in interaction.

As a study of "talk-in-interaction" (Psathas, 1995, p.1) CA analyzes interaction. Its origins were in ethnomethodology, founded by Garfinkel in the 1950s, in which an emic approach was taken to understand social activities by studying ordinary talk (Francis & Hester, 2004). Unlike other data collection methodologies or techniques, the data used in CA are the recordings and transcriptions of naturally-occurring interaction as it takes place (Seedhouse, 2005). The conversations are meticulously transcribed using detailed annotations and symbols (See Appendix).

In defense of their argument to incorporate context and social interaction in SLA research, Firth and Wagner (1997; 2007) draw on their background in SLA and CA to emphasize that speakers in interactions were not only "*participants, learners,* or even *nonnative speakers*" (Firth & Wagner, 2007, p. 801), but they also had identities, such as friends and acquaintances through which they achieve a certain goal in their interactions outside those as language learners. While the identities of the participants in institutional talk, in general, are defined professionally and functionally by their specialized settings (Schegloff, Koshik, Jacoby & Olsher, 2002), the interactions in which they engage contribute to their, sometimes unexpected, new identities. For example, in a teacher-fronted classroom, the temporary absence of a teacher from the interaction can change the student dynamics.

Bridging CA in the Classroom and Teaching

As the overarching method to study talk-in-interaction, CA can help answer some questions, such as the identification of classroom identities of language learners, the effect which interaction with peers has on asymmetrical identities with other students, and the implications that language learner identities have on the classroom environment. There are researchers who discuss the successes of interaction between peers (Swain, Brooks & Tocalli-Beller, 2002); others have paid attention to "interactions that are not part of canonical classroom talk" (DiFelice Box, 2011). While communicative language teaching has inadvertently given rise to new issues of asymmetrical communication and identities between language learners, the source of the problem can also be the potential

solution. The implications from implementing CA in the classroom may range from changing teaching methods and activities to introducing new classroom management techniques for the purpose of enhancing the English language classroom.

CONVERSATION ANALYSIS IN THE CLASSROOM

Classroom Discourse and Identities

CA research in the English language classroom within the past decade has seen an increasing focus on the identity of its participants – teachers and students – as interaction in the classroom is one of the ways in which learning can be accomplished (Hall & Walsh, 2002; Schegloff et al., 2002). CA studies of classroom interaction focus on issues of "how talk in educational contexts is organized, how particular goal-oriented actions are accomplished through this talk, and ways that this talk differs from ordinary conversation and from talk in other educational contexts" (Schegloff et al., p. 14). In CA, identity in interaction is based on the concept of Sacks' Membership Categorization Devices (Sacks, 1972; quoted in Schegloff, 2007), which defines the categories of people, or members in society (e.g., men, women, teachers, and students) and activities are performed by people from related categories (Hester, 1998; Schegloff, 2007).

Walsh (2002) discusses features of teacher talk, which include teachers controlling the discussion topic, content and procedure, as well as who may participate and when. According to Richards (2006), when a participant in classroom interaction is "doing" being a teacher, he/she "controls the floor, asks questions, issues instruction, prompts, and evaluates" (p.61) while "doing" being students involves "addressing their responses to the teacher" (p. 61), and responding to the teacher's turns. Richards (2006) proposes the concept of default identity, which is derived from "recognized identities to which participants in talk would be expected to orient" (p.60). While the default identities in the classroom normally would be teacher and student, Richards' (2006) study has revealed that the direction of classroom interaction can result in reversals of their identities.

When an identity shift takes place, learners are "propelled to take on discourse identities not typically associated with their situated identities" (Wong & Waring, 2010, p.270). However, identity shift can provide "opportunities for learner participation" (p.270) in the second/foreign language classroom as it forces students to orient themselves to an identity which is not their own, and thus, interact with others in their unfamiliar, yet new identity. As a result, identity shift can provide the opportunity for students to discover, explore and experiment with new discourse. However, there is also the possibility of conflicts arising from this redistribution of participant roles.

Conflicts in language learner interaction and identities

Studies on interaction in the language classrooms address a variety of issues on teacher-student interaction, including teacher response (Waring, 2008; Wong & Waring, 2009), and on student-student interaction, such as student dynamics and the emergence of

a domineering student (Hale, 2009, 2012). While the mechanics of interaction, such as turn-taking and sequencing are important CA features, "classroom-based CA studies have made visible specific instructional practices that block or promote such participation," (Wong & Waring, 2010, p. 265).

Examples of conflicts in language learner interaction will be drawn from two CA studies. The first NS/NNS interaction with asymmetrical interaction can be attributed to the initial difference in language proficiency. The second interaction takes place in autonomous groups, where activities are conducted in pairs or groups. As it is impossible for the teacher to monitor students during the entire activity, asymmetrical interaction may result between NNSs.

Native-Speaker/Non-Native-Speaker Interaction

Park (2007) studies NS/NNS interaction and analyzes the discourse identities in classroom activities. Park's position is that identities of NS and NNS do not necessarily coincide with "cultural, ethnic, or national identity" (Park, 2007, p.340), but they are co-constructed between participants. In the following excerpt, the NS/NNS requestor-requestee identities are invoked in a word search activity. In the interaction between two NNS and one NS, one NNS turns to the NS, rather than to the other NNS, for a demonstration of correct English pronunciation.

Excerpt 2
1 Mijin: A [didas. [How do you say – ((turns her gaze towards Tanya))
2 Sangjun: [dh- [((unintelligible))
3 Mijin: A didas. A didas? –
4 Tanya: A didas.
5 Mijin: Adi[das.
6 [((turns her gaze towards Sangjun))

(Park, 2007, p.344)

Between lines 3 and 4 in the text, a photograph of the three participants is inserted where the two NNS – one in the middle and the other on the right side – are seated and their postures are turned towards the NS on the left. Next to the NS, there is a caption which reads "Knowing recipient," implying the assumption that the NS knows the answer. According to Park (2007), while the three participants gaze at Tanya's Adidas sneakers, Mijin requests for the correct pronunciation in English of the word "Adidas" (lines 1 and 3). Park states this interaction as being Mijin's display of "her sensitivity to the uneven distribution of linguistic knowledge among them, publicly ratifying the NS's knowing recipient status" (p.345). At the same time, Mijin addressing Tanya, with the Adidas sneakers, reflects a natural progression of events, instead of addressing Sangjun, who may not be wearing Adidas sneakers. Nevertheless, Park (2007) observes that through this interaction "participants publicly orient to their membership in NS/NNS categories and align themselves asymmetrically in relation to each other" (p.345). While the NS is likely to be perceived as the expert or knower, and the NNS, the novice, the excerpt also shows that NS/NNS identities are asymmetrical alignment of participants which take place momentarily, subject to negotiation. She also adds that asymmetry provides

resources “to move the interaction ahead” (p.355), suggesting that conflicts in negotiation may not be negative. Therefore, the practice of such communities is based on the assumption that negotiations of meaning are acceptable between the NS/NNS, thus allowing the negotiation of identities between the participants.

Non-Native-Speaker/Non-Native-Speaker Interaction

In student-student interactions, while these two identities can be generally maintained when the teacher is present, the absence of the teacher can reveal much information about the participants and the context in which the interaction takes place. Students, unconsciously, look for somebody to whom they orient themselves to hold discussions without a teacher who usually mediates the talk. Whether there will be another individual to take the place of the teacher may depend on such factors as one’s level of linguistic competence, personality, relationship to other students, and knowledge of the discussion topic (Hale, 2009).

In Hale (2012), the interaction of two Asian female ESL students – one Chinese and one Korean – is studied as they perform a task of creating a radio advertisement together. To the outward observer, an equal power play system (Markee, 2000; cited in Hale, 2012, p.6) with “frequent speaker alternation, and minimal interruption and overlap” (p.6) seems to operate. However, using CA to look more closely at the interaction, the author uncovered an escalating conflict over whose ideas are better, which results in a bitter power struggle.

56 Mi: I think ah:: younger child::=
57 Vivi: =No good. Young child is no good. Older people is good.
58 Mi: Why?
59 Vivi: Hu=hu::mor.
60 Mi: But just playing Wii. We need CONVERSATION for ad.
61 Vivi: ↓ Ah::
62 Mi: I see you playing Wii. What are you doing Vivi? I say. Dinner is ready=
63 come on. See=make sentence. [See?]
64 Vivi: [O::h]
65 Mi: Finally family all people play game.
66 Vivi: Yeah=father mother::=
67 Mi: =Finally mother says come on let’s play.
68 Vivi: Oh >nice nice,<
69 Mi: Mmm. Humor bu::t conversation.
70 Vivi: ↑Ah. (2.0) I have a NEW idea. New idea. No younger people play the Wii
71 have the older people play the Wii. And the younger people say what
72 are you doing grandpa? Yeah. And grandma grandpa say I play the Wii.
73 Maybe we have an interesting story.
74 Mi: Yeah. Yeah. But Vivi is it advertisement?
75 Vivi: Advertisement?
76 Mi: Yeah:: Vi:vi:: we want to study a::dvertisement. Target audience all that.
77 Vivi: Ah:: ((laughing))

(Hale, 2012, p.8)

While Mi is trying to stay on task by thinking of a target audience (lines 56 and 76) and the script (lines 60 and 62), it is Vivi, who appears to get derailed and attempts to outperform Mi with her idea (lines 70 to 73). Vivi's use of emotive adjectives, such as "NEW idea" (line 70) and "interesting" (line 73) emphasize her assertion that her ideas are better than Mi's. Hale (2012) suggests that both Vivi and Mi, who were used to being in the dominant position, were "reluctant to give it up to someone whom they did not view as more competent than themselves" (p.11). In addition, he explains that because the teacher considered them to be among the most competent students in class, Vivi and Mi were paired up. Yet, the interaction between the two resulted in conflict and eventual break-down due to their perceived desire to stay in power.

Here, in order to prevent the classroom environment from becoming negative, the introduction and practice of oral communication strategies (Nakatani, 2005) could remind the advanced students that being an effective communicator, in addition to being a proficient English speaker, would be a required ground rule to follow during pair-work or group-work. By doing so, it may help set the stage where community practices conducive to communicating with others can be established.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The focus of this paper was on the classroom identities of English language learners who study in a communicative language classroom, through which I propose the need for teachers to have a heightened awareness of classroom identities. CA is the method through which interaction between students are microanalyzed as they orient to each other, and it is this *orienting* through which their classroom identities can surface (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). While it is important to pay attention to classroom interactions as a means to enhance English language instruction, what may be of interest for Japanese English language teachers is the need to become aware of classroom identities in order to reduce a potentially negative learning environment.

In order to create a classroom environment conducive to learning, several issues need to be addressed. First of all, teaching methods which promote equality need to be explored. Cooperative learning strategies, where all members in the group have a role to perform may help curb the impulse of the students who are vocal and encourage the quieter students to communicate more. In addition, classroom management techniques on the part of the teacher may need to be further enhanced. Time management of tasks and grouping strategies of students may be some of the elements which need to be addressed in order to maintain an orderly classroom with balanced interaction.

Last, but not least, there are *the unobservables* regarding students (Tsui, 2008), which the teacher may need to attend to. This refers to characteristics of students reflected in their performance and behavior in the classroom. For example, there are studies on silence (Nakane, 2005, 2006), reticence (Tsui, 1996) and anxiety (Andrade & Williams, 2009) available, which teacher-practitioners interested in exploring action research may refer to. By researching the areas of concern, rather than drawing stereotypical conclusions, teachers may be able to exercise better judgment in handling issues in the classroom. The result which is hoped to achieve is to create a learner-

friendly classroom environment to enhance both learning for students and teaching for teachers.

CONCLUSION

The shift to communicative-language teaching styles in the English language classroom seems to coincide with the rise of CA studies that focus more on learner participation, including learner identity. While CA research on English language learners from various countries with different first languages has been receiving wider attention within the past decade, I feel that research findings need to be widely available to English language teachers of any nationality. Because classroom identities of students may reveal underexplored areas which call for needs to change existing teaching methods or improve classroom management techniques, CA research may be a window through which solutions may be sought. While researchers such as Seedhouse (2005) are cautious of CA studies conducted by those without sufficient training, others advocate the use of CA by English teachers in the classroom (Walsh, 2011; Wong & Waring, 2010), who may not have the time to be fully trained, yet could benefit from its tenets and techniques.

A final important point that needs to be addressed is the availability of literature for English teachers in the classroom, especially of research done with English language learners in their countries. As most CA articles are research-oriented and do not address classroom applications (Fujimoto, 2010), Walsh (2011) raises a concern that CA studies in SLA are "less accessible to the very people they are intended to influence: language teachers" (Walsh, 2011, p.36). To date, there is limited literature available on Japanese learners of English and their language learner identities, with the exception of Tsuda's (2012) ethnographic study in the junior high classroom, Hale's (2009) research on high school students, and Takeda's (2012) study on identity shift of university EFL students. Therefore, in addition to conducting studies, CA researchers need to make them available to practitioners who may benefit the most from them. As I strongly believe that CA should not be kept in the ivory tower, it is my hope that CA becomes a hands-on method to promote communicative language learning. In addition, I hope the availability and accessibility of CA studies can serve as a vehicle to help teachers to better understand their students and their potential.

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Appendix

CA transcription symbols

.	(period) Falling intonation.
?	(question mark) Rising intonation.
,	(comma) Continuing intonation.
-	(hyphen) Marks an abrupt cut-off.
::	(colon(s)) Prolonging of sound.
wo:rd	(colon after underlined letter) Falling intonation on word.
wo:rd	(underlined colon) Rising intonation on word.
word	(underlining)
word	The more underlying, the greater the stress.

Symbol	Meaning
WORD	(all caps) Loud speech.
°word°	(degree symbols) Quiet speech.
↑word	(upward arrow) Raised pitch.
↓word	(downward arrow) Lowered pitch
>>word<<	(more than and less than) Quicker speech.
<<word>>	(less than & more than) Slowed speech.
<	(less than) Talk is jump-started—starting with a rush.
hh	(series of h's) Aspiration or laughter.
.hh	(h's preceded by dot) Inhalation.
[	(bracket) Beginning of overlapped talk
=	(equal sign) Latch or contiguous utterances of the same speaker.
(2.4)	(number in parentheses) Length of a silence in 10ths of a second
(.)	(period in parentheses) Micro-pause, 0.2 second or less.
( )	(empty parentheses) Non-transcribable segment of talk.
((gazing toward the ceiling))	(double parentheses) Description of non-speech activity.
(try 1)/(try 2)	(two parentheses separated by a slash) Alternative hearings.
$word$	(dollar signs) Smiley voice.
#word#	(number signs) Squeaky voice.

(Adapted from Wong & Waring, 2010, p.xx)