Rehearsal and the creation of an L2 identity

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How can a language learner in Japan create an identity as an English *speaker* as well as an English *learner*? Despite a highly programmed format, a speech contest is a complex sociocultural and sociolinguistic event which can contribute to this transformation. The author, a coach of several successful speech contest participants, defines and describes the rehearsal process for a speech contest in terms of its psycholinguistic structure, using a sociocultural analytic framework.

摘要：日本語言語学習者は、いかにして英語「学習者」としての、また英語「話者」としてのアイデンティティーを同時に形成するのであろうか。スピーチコンテストは高度にプログラム化された形式に関わらず、このアイデンティティー変容に貢献できる複雑な社会文化的且つ社会言語的活動である。スピーチコンテストで成功をおさめた出場者たちを指導してきた著者が、社会文化的分析フレームワークを用いて、心理言語学的構成の観点から、スピーチコンテストのリハーサル過程を定義し、説明する。

Many teachers in Japan hold a justifiably negative view of speech contests: they are too long, too over-rehearsed, and too empty of real or useful language engagement. However, having been asked to coach speech contestants at our small women's university in Osaka, a colleague and I tried to make lemonade out of these lemons. We found that the preparation process can actually be stimulating, challenging, fascinating, unpredictable, and good fun. And the students enjoy it too! What follows is a discussion of why this should be so, underpinned by a sociocultural perspective.

For the coaches, there are several unexpected teaching benefits to be found in the work of preparing a student for a speech contest. Motivation tends to be high, because the contestants participate voluntarily. This is a nice change from the dilatory attitude often found in university English classes in Japan. In addition, the coaching sessions provide an unusually rich opportunity for us to engage in creative, hands-on teaching. In a teaching context where much language instruction is heavily constrained by large classes, required curricula and materials, and low levels of interest, the intimate and animated practice sessions are a welcome change from ordinary teacher-student interactions. On the research side, as someone who has directed and coached

actors, business speakers, and academic presenters, I am particularly interested in knowing how coaching and training actually work. The intensive contest preparation cycle provides abundant and rich data for collection and analysis. Finally, the rehearsal process almost always engenders intrinsic motivation in the contestants: the obvious goal, a prize or trophy, remains attractive, but most of our students come to enjoy the rehearsal for its own sake.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, the practice sessions provide a unique context for a Japanese language student to develop an identity as a *speaker* as well as a *learner* of English. Of course, the rehearsal sessions are somewhat pedagogic in nature; there is some direct language instruction. However, in almost every case, the activity becomes a setting for psycholinguistic transformation. What Norton and Toohey (2001, p. 7) call the "investment" of the learner in the activity of speech making comes to override the purely instructional aspects: identity is of course a fluid and complex thing to specify, but it arises from the constellation of associations a speaker is intertwined with. Every engagement with the second language outside the classroom context affords the learner a chance to construct a new relationship with that language, in other words, a new identity in relation to the language. For the students we have coached over the past three years, the experience of being dynamically involved with a constantly changing and improving piece of text, and with two native-English-speaking instructors, becomes a catalyst for such change.

The discussion that follows is shaped by three guiding questions: What is rehearsal? How is it carried out? How does it help the learner construct a new identity? These questions focus on different elements of the rehearsal process for ease of discussion, but in fact, rehearsal constitutes a complex, integrated setting for linguistic activity.

What is rehearsal?

The answer to this question that is assumed in our work stems from the sociocultural paradigm of psycholinguistics, as it has been developed within the field of second language acquisition in recent decades (Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Based on a study carried out several years ago (Verity, 1992), the analysis of the rehearsal process that follows assumes a basic understanding of certain sociocultural concepts.

Rehearsal as functional system

First, a rehearsal is not a simple event. It is, rather, a *functional system*, a complexly-structured constellation of operations, actions, and goals. A functional system is not deterministic, that is, it results in an invariant task (preparing a speech for competition) but employs variable mechanisms (a wide range of instructional moves, modeling, repetition, encouragement, etc.) (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 56).The final result is neither determined by nor directly retrievable from the initial operations. Second, rehearsal is simultaneously collaborative and dynamic: it comprises a series of goal-directed, but provisional and temporary, decisions made by the participants working together (Donato, 1994, p. 51). Finally, rehearsal is a setting for change: the activity of the participants transforms itself over the course of the process. The student contestant

grows in expertise, to the point of being able to function autonomously as a speech maker, and becomes *more* central to the activity, while the coaches' role recedes, and we become peripheral, indeed, "invisible" in the final performance text (Verity, 1992; 1997).

A common misperception about rehearsal in general, and speech contest rehearsal specifically, is that it involves mostly repetition and mimicry. This view is based on two false assumptions, both of them common among teachers and students who have never done any public speaking or acting. The first assumption is that an ideal end product is fully defined inside the coach's head, and the job of the coach is to transmit this knowledge to the student in the most direct and time-efficient way possible. The second is that such a transfer is even possible. In fact, the end result—what the performance is going to look like—is unknown in the early sessions, and, even if we have good ideas, we cannot simply plant them into the contestant's head. The true process is less predictable and less transparent than these assumptions suggest.

In fact, what is produced in the early stages of the rehearsal only intermittently resembles the final performance of the speech that is given at the actual contest. Of course, we have a better idea than the contestant about what her speech might end up being. We have more experience than she does in what makes a good speech, how to prepare and practice it, how to pronounce English correctly and fluently, and so forth. But we share this knowledge only if and when it can be understood and used by the contestant: much of our job consists of trying to find ways to help her take from us what she needs, while at the same time determining what

she already knows that could be useful and necessary for the speech. Like all true development, rehearsal is neither unidirectional nor cumulative in its progression. The activity changes radically between the early stages and the final stages. Meanings—of words in the speech text, of utterances made by student and coaches, of gestures—change over time. The full significance of much of the final text is clear only in light of all the other utterances that do not end up there: the said and the done, the not-said and the not-done. Rehearsal, though critically dependent upon memory and modeling, cannot be reduced to mimicry and repetition any more than learning how to play the piano can be reduced to finger exercises (DiCamilla & Anton, 1997, p. 631).

Two crucial functions of rehearsal

Indeed, rather than defining rehearsal in terms of unchanging repetition, it is more helpful to consider the role of change in rehearsal. What changes? For one thing, the contestant's relationship to the task and to the primary tool she uses to fulfill the task, i.e., English. She gains a new understanding of what preparing a speech means. In sociocultural terms, she constructs a new orientation to task and a new definition of situation. As her goals change over time, the way she understands the task of speech-making changes, and with it, her strategic ability to engage in the activity of speech-making. The coaches' goals change over time, too, though somewhat less dramatically, as we start out more fully in control of the task. Rather than being 'transmitters of information,' we aim at one goal at first, and re-direct our activity over time to a second: first, we attempt to create a shared orientation, or intersubjectivity, with the student

contestant (Verity, 1992); second, we strive to become unnecessary to her autonomous activity. Rehearsal, then, is a much more complex and engaging task than is commonly understood. In structure it is a series of approximations; in function, it is, crucially, both *orientational* and *proleptic* (Verity, 1992; 1993; 1995; 1996; 1997).

Orientation refers to how a participant defines, or sees, a task. A novice thinks about a task very differently than an expert does. A novice may not even notice crucial elements of the task in the early stages of learning how to do it. As an analogy, think of how it feels to function in a new cultural context: in a new culture, we may lose our ability to function autonomously and become novices again. Consider the simple example of paying for lunch. In the USA, the customer knows to signal the server—who brings the bill, takes the money, and provides change—and to leave a tip on the table. In Japan, on the other hand, the customer knows that the server will leaves the bill on the table, discreetly furled in a small plastic holder; at the end of the meal, the customer knows to bring the bill to the cash register at the front door of the establishment, and to pay there. No tip is left.

In both countries, the activity is the 'same' in that the same goal (paying for the meal) is accomplished, but the structure of the task (the sub-goals, the actions and operations used to carry it out) is completely different. Thus, an American in Japan would be a novice at the task of paying for lunch and would need to create a new orientation to the task in order to be able to carry it out successfully.

In a real-life situation, orientation tends to be ad hoc and pragmatic. Being a novice is relative: the American customer might not even notice the bill in its plastic holder, but nevertheless would know that somehow, somewhere, there is a bill to be paid. One customer might look around and imitate what expert (i.e., Japanese) customers do; another might signal the server over to the table American-style, or leave money on the table. The goal is to pay the bill; the customer takes in the new knowledge only if it useful for the future.

In a pedagogic situation, however, observation is rarely sufficient to learn the kinds of tasks that are typically set in school, and there is a greater potential for negative repercussions when tasks are not performed correctly. Classroom tasks are less contextualized and less concrete than tasks in real life, which is why classrooms have teachers. Helping the learner make sense of what the task is (i.e., orientation) is the teacher's first responsibility. In the case of the speech contest, we, the coaches, have to help the contestant get some sense of what a speech in a speech contest is. As experts, we have a richer, more nuanced and more helpful understanding of the task of creating and practicing a speech than she does. And, for all sorts of reasons, from ethical to psycholinguistic, it is impossible for us simply to tell her what to do. She must come to be able to do it herself, albeit with strategic help from us. So, in order for our help to make any sense, the early phases of the process must help her to come to share our orientation towards the task.

As her orientation changes, inevitably her goals change as well. When the contestant first comes to meet with us, she typically defines the task as 'write a good essay, memorize it, and pronounce it correctly.' We see the task quite differently: it is more like 'investigate your life experience to find a

lesson that is worth sharing with the audience and create a written script that will be interesting and exciting when performed for the audience.' In that first meeting, this kind of definition makes no sense to her; it only comes to mean something slowly as she does the work of the rehearsal. We cannot simply tell her to change her mind.

Getting the contestant to share our orientation allows the rehearsal to proceed, if not perfectly smoothly, then with some sense that we are moving in the same direction for the same reasons. This is particularly important because the early stages of rehearsal are so random-seeming. If the student sticks to her original simplistic understanding of the task, then many of our strategies and activities seem wasteful and useless. Having at least a rudimentary understanding of why we spend so much time talking, questioning, re-stating, and so forth, helps the contestant to participate willingly.

The second major function of rehearsal is *proleptic*. While the end product is unknown or extremely vague in outline during the early stages, nevertheless the rehearsal proceeds as if it exists. Goal-directed activity goes forward assuming the goal is immanent, that is, extant and accessible. (Of course, her specific speech does not exist, but all good speeches share enough commonalities that the goal '*a good speech*' can be glimpsed, even though *her* good speech is still being constructed.) That is to say, the rehearsal gives the novice a preview of the final product, but, crucially, in terms that make sense to her. That is, even before she fully understands what it is she has set out to do, we try to give her a sense of what a great speech is like. To some extent, prolepsis presupposes that a novice can understand something that is beyond her competence; we ask her, early

on, to do more than she is actually capable of doing, based on our belief that proficiency emerges from the activity of rehearsal itself (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004, p. 5).

The process approach in writing pedagogy is perhaps a more familiar setting for prolepsis: the writer goes through overlapping drafts, varying versions, selection and rejection of material while in the process of construction the very text that is the goal of the process. What is different in speech making is that not only a written text but also a performance text must be constructed. In rehearsal the contestant is asked to engage in tasks that involve writing, speaking, pronouncing, remembering, explaining, abstracting, and organizing. There is no set order to the way we move among the tasks; we respond to each contestant's strengths and weaknesses. As one element of the speech is improved, another might become temporarily weaker. Ultimately, we aim to have the contestant pull them all together into a coherent whole. In sociocultural terms, we help the contestant create and move through a series of Zones of Proximal Development for all the elements of the speech.

The end goal of rehearsal is not to 'make a new speech' but to help the contestant gain greatly increased control of the task of performing an excellent speech. Creating a new orientation through joint activity with the contestant and using proleptic mediational strategies allow us to disappear from her activity. She becomes, over time and through engagement with the material, the sole speaker/writer of her speech. Clearly, this goal is not a simple accumulation of sub-steps; her relationship to us, to the material of the speech, and to the activity of using English to express her meanings changes in complex and multidimensional ways.

How is rehearsal carried out?

Although most rehearsals end up following a similar progression, each one starts uniquely. We start our rehearsals in an open-ended, even random, fashion. Our early moves are extremely variable, depending upon the student involved, her expressed choice of topic, the time frame, and her ability to express her thoughts fluently in English. Often the first two or three sessions end up being warm-up sessions, during which the student learns to relax and feel comfortable using English in a room alone with two native-English-speaking teachers.

Under some pressure of time, the coaches have to initiate the contestant into the new semiotic universe of the speech contest and get her to engage with language and content there. This means introducing and illustrating basic terminology; orienting her to the unexpectedly wide variety of tasks she will need to engage with; scaffolding her as she attempts to choose, delineate, focus, and refine her topic; using and discarding mediational techniques in hopes of finding the ones that will work best; and providing feedback on everything she does. In these terms, rehearsal closely resembles the pedagogic approach based on Vygotskyan principles known as Dynamic Assessment (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, pp. 327-357).

An exciting factor about this process is how unbalanced the distribution of knowledge at first: the coaches know everything about speech contests and almost nothing about the speaker, while she knows everything about herself and nothing about contests. In this void of shared understanding, the coach needs to find a way of making the task of speech-making comprehensible. Typically, we start with some common brainstorming techniques using very open-ended questions with follow-ups for detail and example. The closest we come to referring to the final product is to repeat a key question we have found useful:" What do you want the audience to learn from you?"

In fact, underlying this question are two different questions, though we do not explicate them both to the contestant early on. On the one hand, we want the student to think about the scope of her particular topic ("What do you want the audience to learn about *your* life?") and, on the other, we want her to begin to articulate the 'core message' of the speech, which will raise the content to a more abstract level than just her individual experience ("What do you want the audience to learn about *life*?"). Being proleptic about the nature of a great speech (it combines the personal and the general) helps the contestant understand more quickly the idea that each speech is a tailored mix of personal narrative and objective interpretation. Although it is confusing at first, by coming at the topic from both perspectives early on—top-down and bottom-up, as it were—it helps the contestant move forward.

Besides questions, in the early sessions we use anecdotes from our personal and professional lives and from the experiences of previous contestants. We sometimes use a limited number of direct instructions (for example, 'write that down, you may want to use it later!' or 'tell that story again, but don't leave out any of the details'). We frequently offer alternative tellings and restatements, which function as confirmation of our comprehension and as indirect feedback on form. And we request further information and detail. In themselves, these are familiar pedagogical devices, but in the

rehearsal, with its imposed time frame, high motivation all around, and unpredictable final product, they are particularly powerful. Although the very earliest encounters tend towards the random, by the third or fourth session, we have a strong sense of the contestant's particular strengths and weaknesses, both linguistic and operational, and we direct our mediation in ways that reflect this understanding (Verity & Fujimoto, 2006).

Just as a rehearsal is not simply an episode of repetition and replication, a speech is not a written essay spoken aloud. Especially because our college trains students extensively in the classic five-paragraph essay format, their early efforts are strongly influenced by what they have learned in writing classes. The speech genre is less rigid in structure: speech texts are often impressionistic rather than structured by rhetorical type. We help the contestant re-define what is acceptable by showing tapes of previous contest performances, discussing how oral language differs from written language, and even refusing to use certain terms, such as thesis statement or topic sentence. We demonstrate the important role that paralinguistic features, such as changes in tone of voice, posture, and eye gaze signals for topic and focus shifts play in speech giving. In sociocultural terms, we re-symbolize the world of English text production with them: in this new setting, a text can be less structurally predictable, but also must be more conceptually integrated, than typical classroom texts. We underscore the aural nature of the speech by not requiring a written form of the speech until relatively late in the rehearsal process.

A benchmark of expert activity is versatility: if one action or tool does not work, the expert knows how and where to find another one. So an important focus throughout the rehearsal sessions is on producing, selecting, and rejecting material. It takes so much effort for a novice to produce any text that it is difficult to convince her to throw some of it away! We use a two-fold strategy that exploits both a strength and a weakness of the typical university learner of English: while asking the contestant to produce more material (almost always she lacks important and interesting specific detail in her first versions), we remind her that she will ultimately have only 5 minutes to speak. These intentionally contradictory messages serve to provide parameters for her activity: since there are ethical limits to what we can do for the contestant, by pushing her in two conflicting directions, we get her to move herself towards the goal. In a way, our moves can be seen as keeping her on the right track, while her own activity actually builds the track as she moves forward on it (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004, p. 6). The process produces a speech maker who can more easily (i.e., more expertly) throw out, modify, rewrite, and adapt her own writing. Though writing English is difficult, telling time is easy; she can choose how she can best shuttle between these two demands.

Finally, since we often have the luxury of having two coaches available for most coaching sessions, we use dialogue and even argument to illustrate and model our points. A contestant may hear two directly opposing opinions about a choice she has made, and though of course we often do negotiate our way to an agreement, neither coach needs to give in because the ultimate decision is the contestant's. By hearing disagreement, and seeing our willingness to discard or modify apparently strong opinions, the student is

supported as she develops the habit mentioned above, the ability to select and reject material efficiently.

Throughout, of course, we try to address the secondary, but still relevant and appropriate, sub-goals of language improvement, and offer frequent feedback on pronunciation, grammar, lexis, sentence structure, register and tone. In reality, because of time pressures, these points are frequently corrected by fiat during a late editing session, rather than truly rehearsed, practiced, and internalized through graduated and contingent correction techniques.

In sum, our mediational coaching techniques are interactional, dialogue-based, only occasionally directive, and frequently embedded in non-instructional-sounding utterances. They usually function on at least two levels, as they are designed to help the contestant discover what she needs to know and simultaneously speed her in that discovery. There is an awful lot of apparently aimless talk early in the rehearsal process, and more than one student has commented on how non-directive we are. Then, when her new understanding clicks into place, and she realizes how engaged she must be with both her topic and with the contest rules, it suddenly, in the words of one recent student, 'becomes interesting.'

How does rehearsal help the learner build a new identity?

Transformation happens on three levels: psycholinguistic, rhetorical, and social. *Psycholinguistically*, the contestant does not develop hugely in general L2 proficiency, but we see much greater ease in speaking about ideas, stating opinions, expressing judgments, and making intertextual references (mostly to conversations rather than written texts) in English by the end of the rehearsal process. As sociocultural theory predicts, joint activity in the L2 changes the relationship of the speaker to the language as much as it changes anything (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In terms of being autonomous in the complex and demanding psycholinguistic task of preparing and delivering an English speech for public performance, the contestant develops greater versatility. While her expertise is of course limited, she has explored and extended the limits of her own linguistic proficiency.

On another level she develops *rhetorical* expertise. The written text of the speech undergoes numerous and extensive changes over the weeks of the rehearsal process; and while the main goal of rehearsing is not simply to produce a written text, the wide-ranging and radical revisions contribute to the contestant's newly-defined relationship to written English: it can be thrown away! It can be manipulated, changed, improved, worked and reworked….. the concept of 'process,' which is so often given lip service in a writing class, is at the heart of the rehearsal. The contestant learns through our shared activity that English, a 'book subject' so often defined in the Japanese university context in terms of right answers and good scores, is in fact a tool for human engagement and self-presentation in the world, a real and familiar psychological artifact.

A third level of change happens on the *social* level: the student gains an identity that is defined by non-school parameters. Of course, participation in the speech contests is contingent upon her status as a student, but by the time

she walks out onto the stage of the contest hall, she is a new person in that she is using English to present a complexly structured, even sophisticated, version of her own life. She is, at that moment, herself, vulnerable in all the ways she would be if she were giving a speech in Japanese. Her performance is reducible neither to her memorization nor to her grammar and pronunciation. She uses English to define herself in performance, rather than letting her incomplete knowledge of English define how she performs, as is so often the case in class.

Conclusion

Rehearsal for speech contests is a limited psycholinguistic and social context of language use. However, there are aspects of this work that can be transferred to more common language teaching settings, such as helping science students and scientists prepare conference and class presentations in English, working with business people to prepare presentations, and even working with regular students on ordinary class presentations, especially in a small class or seminar, where individual instruction is more possible than in most large university classes.

Regardless of whether coaching techniques themselves are borrowed for other instructional settings, rehearsal illustrates at least two important points about language acquisition and instruction. As a first point, language practice is language use. There is no learning a language separate from a context of use. Some contexts, such as grammar drills and mechanistic 'communicative' exercises, may differ profoundly from real-world uses, but they are in fact contexts of use. Second, joint activity must be exactly that:

despite the teacher (or coach)'s vastly greater expertise and experience with using the L2, there are things that learners bring to the instructional setting which only they know, and which only they can say. When preparing a speech, this distribution of knowledge directly flows into a distribution of responsibility for the rehearsal sessions. In a classroom, too often whatever the learners bring is discounted or de-privileged, not necessarily due to any malice on the teacher's part, but simply due to the entrenched power and curricular structures of the traditional classroom. Thinking of instruction as coaching—responding to what the learner seems to be trying to do, all the while helping her see that there are other ways of doing it, and even other things she might be trying—allows the learner an equal psycholinguistic role in the dialogue of growth.

Sociocultural theory reminds us that product cannot easily be disentangled from process. The act of giving the speech in public ineluctably carries inside it the activity of production. Even if a contestant, by some miracle, sat down in the first rehearsal session and wrote down exactly the text that she later delivered in the contest, it would not be the same. Rehearsal changes it by imbuing it with both social and material history: materially, the language would be changed simply through translation to the spoken mode, and socially, she would be different, too, because of her participation in the collaborative history of preparation.

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