

# Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads



## Co-construction of JSL role-plays

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### Reference data:

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Recent sociocultural theories of second language acquisition (SLA) have treated classrooms as sites for “identity negotiation” and have asserted that learning involves the reconstruction of identities. In what ways are learners engaging in this process and what kinds of identities are they reconstructing in everyday classroom activities? In this study, I show speech data of learners role-playing in a Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) classroom. The recorded conversations are diverse in terms of not only sociolinguistic functions such as invitation, refusal, asking, and apology, but also human relationships such as friends, roommates, neighbors, and a customer-salesclerk relationship. Through the discourse analysis of excerpted data with special focus on the sociological concepts, I argue that learners do not play a single role assigned to them by the teacher, but rather create new roles constantly with their peer learners, which implies that role-playing is an emergent and collaborative process and that the process ultimately leads to the reconstruction of identities.

第二言語習得をめぐる近年の社会文化的理論は教室をアイデンティティ交渉の場とみなし、学習にはアイデンティティの再構築が伴うと主張する。学習者はこの過程にどのように参加し、日常的な教室活動においてどのようなアイデンティティを再構築しているのだろうか。本研究では、あるJSL教室で行われたロールプレイから学習者の会話データを紹介する。録音された会話は社会言語学的機能(招待、断り、依頼、謝罪など)から見ても、人間関係(友達、ルームメイト、隣人、店員・顧客など)から見ても多様である。筆者は、社会学的概念に焦点を当てた抜粋データの談話分析を通じ、学習者が単に教師から割り当てられた役割を演じるにとどまらず、共同学習者とともに絶えず新たな役割を創出している、と論ずる。これは、ロールプレイが最終的にはアイデンティティの再構築につながる創発的かつ協働的な過程であることを示唆するものである。

In the field of learning science, Lave and Wenger (1991) observed an apprenticeship, where novices work together with a group of experts to acquire all knowledge through everyday practice, and named this small society of novices and experts as a community of practice. They call the novices’ entrance into the community a legitimate peripheral participation and asserted that learning is not an activity of an individual separated from others but an activity through interaction with others; in that, learning is embedded in the situation.

Lave and Wenger’s situated learning model has been proposed based on the constructivists’ view of identity. On the one hand, many traditional humanists think that identity is an inner core of self and can

be found in the course of one's development; in other words, identity is a psychological factor separated from the situation. On the other hand, constructivists think that identity is constructed through one's social interaction. The community of practice perspective is surely in line with this constructivist view, in that novices' identities are co-constructed through their interaction with experts in the apprenticeship. In other words, Lave and Wenger thought that learning involves identity construction or identity transformation.

As Swain and Deters (2007) point out, many second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have applied the notion of community of practice to their studies, in which second language learners are treated as newcomers to the community and typically characterized by their peripherality. The research of Swain and Deters also follows Lave and Wenger's ethnographical or ethnomethodological styles, using field study, participant observation, interviews of teachers and learners, which lead to a tendency for their research work to focus on naturalistic settings rather than classroom activities.

Though employing the community of practice as a philosophical framework, this study is distinct in at least two senses. Firstly, I regard a classroom as the community of practice and focus on classroom language activities, since classrooms have been a busier contact site with persons of other cultures than any other opportunities for a native language teacher like me and since I always have to do action research as a teacher not as a pure observer.

Secondly, as a Japanese who grew up in Japan and so uses Japanese language competently, I would like to be aware

of the importance of treating my Asian students equitably despite their relative incompetence in the language. Given that the instructor, in this way, takes a non-authoritarian stance, how can the community of practice framework be reformulated specifically for the Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) context? This research question is rephrased as the following. What kind of characteristics does the JSL classroom as a community of practice have? In what way are the identities of the learners as community members constructed?

### Theoretical background

The origin of recent school ethnomethodologists goes back to the older generation of American sociologists who had special interests in everyday lives of ordinary people. Goffman (1974) asserted that everyday life is like a performance and we always play different roles. In order to play those roles successfully, we need to have stage, scenery, costumes, and a collection of voices, facial expressions, and movements. In short, we are all actors and actresses who are playing in front of an audience.

As we see in a theater, we have the stage where the performance takes place and the backstage where actors put on their costume and make-up and do rehearsals. Goffman differentiates the two regions and calls the former onstage and the latter backstage. Classrooms are included in onstage regions as are other public places like restaurants, trains, and shops. Goffman notes that what makes a region an onstage or a backstage region is not the place itself, but whether or not an audience is present. This means a private place can become onstage if an audience is included in it.

This study picks up role-plays among various classroom activities, since role-plays feature many aspects of Goffman's performance. While two performers are role-playing, the other students are watching them as an audience. Two performers are in an onstage region once the role-play starts and are in a backstage region after it ends.

### Setting and participants

The classes of Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hong-Kong students at a Japanese language school in Japan participated in the study. The students are in a JSL setting, which means they use the Japanese language every day. The classes are made up of some 20 students at the intermediate level and are taught by the author.

### Procedure

I used the textbook *Rooru purei de manabu chuukyuu kara jookyuu eno nihongo kaiwa* (Japanese conversational role-plays for intermediate and upper levels) by Yamauchi (2000) which targets intermediate-level learners who have finished introductory courses and can manage simple daily conversation. The textbook consists of seven units based on scenes, such as restaurants and coffee shops, apartments, somewhere in town, which students may possibly be familiar with in daily life.

The textbook presents two different procedures: (a) the task-preceding type, in which learners first do role-play as a trial and then are presented with useful expressions, and (b) the expression-preceding type, in which they first learn expressions and then do role-plays. I chose the latter after

considering my students' proficiency of conversational skills and took the following steps:

1. The teacher gave introductory questions on the scenes specified in the textbook to stimulate students' background knowledge from their real lives after arrival in Japan. For example, as preparation for role-plays in such situations as renting a DVD at a rental store, drinking at a drinking establishment, moving into a new apartment, and so on, the teacher encourages some students to talk about their personal experience and thoughts.
2. The teacher introduced conversational expressions.
3. Students filled in the blanks in the model conversation and the teacher corrected their expressions.
4. Students were assigned the roles and created short conversations (pair work). Sometimes they made notes which the teacher corrected after the class.
5. Students recited their conversations. Sometimes they had to improvise because the teacher shuffled the pairs. After the performances, the teacher gave them some feedback.

This role-play is an open role-play. The textbook only instructs the first one or two functions such as invitation and refusal, but leaves the whole storyline and the endings such as reconciliation and understanding or farewell to the students.

## Data

From November 2007 to August 2008, I brought my IC recorder into the classes I taught and I recorded students' speech data with their permission when they did role-plays. Seven classes in the intermediate-level participated. These classes were not chosen specifically for this study but were intact classes that I was assigned by my supervisor to teach conversation using role-plays. The typical 15-20 minute data per class totaled 4 hours and 24 minutes. I listened to all of the data and selected several short clips for analysis.

## Analysis

Every scene in the textbook contains major sociolinguistic functions which students are supposed to learn, such as invitation, refusal, asking a favor, offering an apology, and making an excuse. These functions have often been discussed in terms of the ways people show their relationship such as with facial expressions and politeness of language. This study, however, focuses on how people manage the activities they perform during interaction. In order to understand each other, we have to interpret what others do and say according to some kind of framework of expectation. Goffman (1974) calls this framework of expectation a frame.

Broader general ideas about what is going on and what we are doing are called interpretive frames. When people go to a different culture, they could be totally lost because a different interpretive frame is used in the culture. When two performer students start their role-plays, the other students in the audience use their interpretive frames to interpret what is going on in front of them and to understand that the

performance is just a performance at a different level from real life.

Within these broader interpretative frames are smaller frames called interactive frames. These are the ways we signal in our interaction what we are doing moment by moment, whether we are joking, arguing, flirting, or showing concern. We signal these different frames by using the part of our expressive equipment which Gumperz (1982) calls contextualization cues. For example, when a role-play starts, as the teacher, I ask students to applaud, not only to encourage the two performers that are in front of the audience, but also to make a clear switch from backstage region to onstage region. In this sense, the applause functions as a contextualization cue. In short, the cues are used for a transition from one frame to another frame.

In the following analysis, I focus on the interpretive frames and contextualization cues within the students' role-plays, since the focal point of this study is on what kind of characteristics a classroom as a community has and how a learner's identity is constructed.

## *Let's drink*

The invitation, one of the most typical sociolinguistic functions, appears in the first unit of the textbook. One role-card instructs student A to invite the other student B to have a drink after class. The other role-card instructs student B to refuse A's invitation because B does not like to drink so much. Excerpt 1 was performed by the first pair in this class. Student A is male and Student B is female. The numbered lines show the students' original speeches in Japanese and

the next line is my rough translation.

Excerpt 1

- 1 A: *anoo a lin san, kyoo hima.*  
\*\*-san, are you free today?
- 2 B: *hima.*  
Yes, I'm free.
- 3 Audience: *hima.* (laughs) *kawaii. itsumoto onaji.*  
Free. Cute. As usual.
- 4 A: *ee kyoo minna to iku ittai da kedo, iku.*  
I want to go out with everyone today. Will you come?
- 5 B: *dare to dare.*  
Who will come?
- 6 A: *kurasumeeto minnamo ikundato omoundakedo.*  
All classmates will go, I think.
- 7 B: *a soodesuka. sensei wa.*  
Really? How about the teacher?
- 8 A: *uun sensei mo iku.*  
He will come, too.
- 9 B: *aa soodesuka itsu.*  
I see. When?
- 10 A: *uun.*  
Well...
- 11 B: *nanji.*  
What time?
- 12 A: *uun nanji kanaa. shichiji gurai kanaa.*  
Let me see, what time... maybe about seven o'clock.

- 13 B: *a soodesuka. sumimasen, ano, shichiji wa sigoto arudesukara.*  
Oh, really. I will be working at seven o'clock. Sorry.
- 14 A: *hi himananohi.*  
You said you are free.
- 15 Audience: (laughs)
- 16 B: *jikan wa jikan wa imakara shichiji made ni. sumimasenne.*  
Yes, I will be free from now to seven. Really sorry.
- 17 A: *ja doo shiyo.*  
What shall I do?
- 18 B: *mata kondo daijobu.*  
Next time. Is that O.K. with you?
- 19 A: *ma daijobu dato omou. demo dooyatte minnato hanasukana.*  
I think that's O.K. But how should I explain it to everyone?
- 20 B: *hai suimasenne.*  
I'm really sorry.
- 21 A: *ja mata kondo zehi.*  
Be sure to come next time.
- 22 B: *hai.*  
Sure.

The storyline follows the typical invitation and refusal process which contains various smaller interactive frames. Line 1 forms the lead frame or introductory remarks before invitation, where performer A asks B's availability. This line and the next one cause the audience to laugh, because

asking “are you free or not?” sounds rather direct even between friends—with the connotation that the Japanese *hima* implies of complete absence of work, study, plans or activity—sounds exaggerated and even somewhat childish. The comment *kawaii* (cute) from the audience also shows that the interaction in Japanese is rather unsophisticated without polite embellishment and so humorous. In this role-play, however, this unexpected laugh functions as a contextualization cue to shift this lead frame to the next invitation frame. Then performer B makes sure of other conditions for invitation (in this case, the time) in line 11, which functions as a lead frame for the next refusal frame.

The funniest moment in this role-play is in line 14, where performer A means that performer B’s remark (line 13: “I will be working at seven”) is inconsistent with what she said before (“I’m free”). At this point, performer A’s interactive frame is “the straight man” (*tsukkomi* in Japanese comedy called *manzai*) and performer B’s one is “the funny man” (*boke*). Then the audience’s laughs function as a contextualization cue once again to shift from this comic frame to an excuse frame (line 17). The role-play ends with the ordinary closing remarks for maintaining the human relationship such as “OK. No problem. Let’s go next time.”

As a teacher, I expected most of the interactive frames, which are lead, invitation, refusal, excuse, and maintenance of relationship. But I did not expect the two interactive frames of straight man and funny man. These roles are newly created beyond the teacher’s expectations through the interaction of the two performers. Gumperz (1982) states that “communication is a social activity requiring the coordinated efforts of two or more individuals” and that “speakers

must enlist others’ cooperation and actively seek to create conversational involvement” to create meaningful dialogue. In addition, the speakers must interpret the meaning of what is said through contextualization. In this way, the meaning is created through interaction within particular situations by specific people who have certain shared knowledge. As such, this coordinated dialogue is co-constructed interaction.

I could not be certain whether this creation of new roles was improvisation at the time of the performance or recitations from the students’ prepared notes. However, I am sure that the two performers created this new frame with the understanding that their conversation was to be watched by the audience, their fellow students. In other words, the existence of an audience in onstage regions elicited the creation of the new roles and frame. So, the notion of co-construction should be extended as follows: In role-play activities, meanings are created not only through interaction of the performers but through interaction between the performers and the audience, even if they are prepared in advance and are not spontaneous.

The following excerpt is a role-play which was presented in the same class after Excerpt 1 was performed. Student C is female and student D is male.

#### Excerpt 2

- 1 C: \*\* *san, kyo jikan aru.*  
\*\* -san, do you have time today?
- 2 D: *un, daijoobu dato. nande.*  
Yes, I think it’s O.K. Why?
- 3 C: *watashi kyo osake nomitainoyo. isshoni ikanai.*  
I want to go drinking today. Shall we go together?

- 4 D: *uun kyo wa chottoo...*  
Well, today it's a little bit difficult.
- 5 C: *nande, jikan arunoni.*  
Why? You said you have time!
- 6 Audience: (laughs)
- 7 D: *kyoowa chooshi ga yokunaishi chotto tsukareteirukara chotto muri to omou.*  
Today I don't feel good and I'm a little tired. I don't think I can go.
- 8 C: *soredewa shooga nainee. mata kondo ni shiyoo gommenne.*  
Then I can't insist. Next time. Sorry.
- 9 D: *uun gommenne.*  
Yeah. I'm sorry.

In line 5 student C responds very quickly to point out the contradiction in student D stating that he cannot go out, even though he has said he had time. Both the speed of response and the accusatory nature of line 5 make the situation sound rather dramatic, as well as the fact that student C plays a "straight man" role and student D plays a "funny man" one. The "dramatic moment" in line 5 of Excerpt 2 causes audience laughter in a similar way to Excerpt 1, in that the interaction is interpreted as fast, direct, and lacking in polite verbosity.

Though the two pairs prepared notes for the performance separately and did not show or even discuss them with each other, it still remained unclear whether the echo between Excerpt 1 and 2 occurred coincidentally or not, since factors outside the class have not been examined yet. However, it can be argued at least that, after their performances, the

humor frame as an interpretive frame is shared by classroom members.

The next pair E and F performed in the same class and showed this echo more clearly. Student E is female and student F is male.

## Excerpt 3

- 1 E: *\*\* san, kyo jugyo ga owattara jikan ga aru.*  
*\*\* -san, do you have time after class?*
- 2 F: *Ah, sumimansen chottoo.*  
Oh, sorry I...
- 3 E: *nande.*  
Why?
- 4 Audience: (laughs)
- 5 E: *watashi watashi izakaya ikitain desukedo.*  
I want to go to a pub.
- 6 F: *demo, kuji ni, kuji ni, kuji ato denwa ga arundesukedo daijoobu desuka.*  
But I have to answer a call at nine o'clock. Is that all right?
- 7 E: *un osokutemo watashi wa daijoobu dayo.*  
*warawara ikitai yo.*  
I don't mind if it's late. I really want to go wararawa (\*).
- 8 Audience: (noise) *warawara ikitai.*  
I want to go warawara, too.
- 9 F: *chotto eki no jikan ga mani awanai.*  
I am worried I will miss the last train.
- 10 E: *daijoobu, daijoobu. takusii ga arukara nee.*  
Don't worry. We can take a taxi.

- 11 Audience: (laughs)  
 12 F: *okane naindesukedo.*  
 I don't have money.  
 13 E: *okane watasi takusan arukara daijoobu.*  
 I have a lot of money. No problem.  
 14 Audience: (louder noise)  
 (\*) the name of a cheap Japanese-style pub chain.

In line 4 of this excerpt, the audience laughs, not because in line 3 student F points out the contradiction of student E's remarks. Indeed, there is no inconsistency in line 1 and line 2. If so, then why does the audience laugh? It can be assumed that E's remark "why" does not function as an interrogative but functions as a contextualization cue for the transition to the humor frame as interactive frame, and then the audience refers to the humor frame which has already been shared by classroom members in Excerpt 2.

In Excerpt 3, for student E and F (and in the previous Excerpt 2 of student C and D), it is also pointed out that the dialogues disturb the socially expected position of men and women. Conventionally, a man invites a woman to have a drink, but in Excerpt 2 and 3, the female students invite the male students to have drinks. More than that, in Excerpt 3, the female student says she wants to drink very much, she is willing to pay a lot of money for the drinks, and eventually, she can continue drinking past the time for the last train.

This means that in the role-plays, the interpretive frame Goffman proposed is not the same as the one in the real world. Role-play does not follow the interpretive frames which are typical in the real world; in other words, the norms of human relationships. Rather it can disturb the order of the

real world by creating a new interpretive frame which can be used only in the role-play. Another point is that this new interpretive frame echoes previous dialogues and is shared in the classroom community. Indeed, the proposing woman frame echoes between Excerpt 2 and 3 and is shared by the classroom members.

### *At the DVD rental shop*

The next role-play is a typical novice-expert talk, in which a novice asks something of an expert. In this role-play, the role card instructs student A to look for a DVD or video and to ask a sales clerk to help him/her. The setting is that student A knows the story but forgets the title. The other role-card instructs student B to treat this customer A from the position of a sales clerk of a DVD or video rental shop.

Usually, an expert has power over a novice since the expert has knowledge. We can confirm this power-relationship in the discussion about apprenticeship by Lave and Wenger (1991). However, this power relationship is not always visible but may appear subtly in certain situations. A customer and a sales clerk is one of such relationships. Firstly, it is not clear who knows more about the store's items, the sales clerk or the customer, especially in a modern computerized shop. Secondly, there is another factor in the power relationship: exchange of item and money. It is also not clear who has power over who, the sales clerk who has items to sell, or the customer who has money to pay.

Excerpt 4:

- 1 A: *saafaa ga byooki ni natte...*

- 2 B: A surfer gets sick...  
*saafaatte daredesuka.*  
Who is this saafaa?
- 3 Audience: (laughs)
- 4 C: *saafaa senshu siranai no saafaa.*  
Don't you know "surfer?"
- 5 B: *a sooka.*  
Ah, I got it!
- 6 A: *ano umini (...).*  
In the sea (...)
- 7 B: *aaaaa...hai.*  
Ah, hai.
- 8 A: *saafaa ga shinu (...).*  
The surfer dies (...)
- 9 B: *nihon no eiga desuka.*  
Is that a Japanese movie?
- 10 A: *nihon no eiga desu.*  
Yes, it's a Japanese movie.
- 11 B: *asoko ni nihon no eiga no tokoro ga arimasuyo.*  
There is a corner for Japanese movies over there.
- 12 A: *ja taitoru wa.*  
What's the title?
- 13 B: *wakarimasen.*  
I don't know.
- Audience: (laughs)
- 14 B: *watashi ga sono naka de aru eiga o zenbu miteru wake ja naidesuyone. watashi wakarimasen. suimasen.*  
I don't necessarily watch all the movies in that corner. I don't know. Sorry.

- 15 A: *mo iiyo.*  
O.K. I don't need it anymore.
- 16 Audience: (laughs) *chotto samisii.*  
It's a little sad.

(\* Student C is one of the audience.

In Excerpt 4, the role of funny man can be seen in line2, "Who is this saafaa?" Student B as a sales clerk pretends to be ignorant and uses the Japanese word *saafaa* borrowed from the English surfer, and interprets this word as a foreigner's name. Of course, the student knows the English word "surfer" and she is just playing the role of funny man. In line 4, one of the audience, instead of the customer, plays the role of straight man by taking the sales clerk's question seriously, which helps conversational progression. This shows that the roles of funny man and straight man are shared by the audience.

The next funny point is in line 14, where the sales clerk explained why she does not know the title of the movie the customer is looking for. The audience and the customer do not interpret this line straightly as a rational excuse for her ignorance. This line is an expression of her anger at a bothersome customer who is asking about many details she does not know. In other words, the sales clerk responds aggressively to the customer here and this situation can be translated into the Japanese word, *gyaku-gire* (*gyaku* means reverse and *gire* or *kire* means lose one's temper). Such an aggressive response can be understood as a sort of interactive frame which Goffman says is created in everyday conversation.

## Conclusion

As far as role-play activity is concerned, the analysis of this research can partly answer the question, “In what way are the identities of the learners as community members constructed?” In JSL role-plays, learners co-construct their performances with peer learners, that is, pairs of performers with an audience; in other words, through repeating peer learners’ expressions in their own performances in the process of performer-audience rotation. Learners do not play a single role assigned to them by the teacher, but rather create new interactive frames with new roles such as funny man (*boke*), straight man (*tsukkomi*), and aggressive response (*gyakugire*) and they share those frames and roles in the classroom.

However, it is too premature to answer the other part of this question about the learners’ identities. The analysis of the learners’ role-play speech data only shows that they have an identity as a peer learner in the same classroom. As far as this analysis goes, whether a learner can share and enjoy the co-construction of interactive frames, is the only condition for him/her to be included as a peer learner in the classroom as a community. This notion of identity as a peer student is possibly intertwined with other identities related to their gender, nationality, and other social factors. To examine this, more detailed verification of the speech data I collected and collection of learner data through interviews and observation are needed.

The question, “What kind of characteristics does the JSL classroom as a community of practice have?” is also left to be answered more fully in a further study. But some hints were already shown in my analysis, especially concerning

the relationship with the real world. The co-constructed community does not necessarily imitate the real world, but disturbs the order of the real world and makes fun of it.

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