Engaging in collaborative learning in a Japanese language classroom*

Keywords
collaborative learning, types of teaching and learning, social constructionism, foreign/second language education

This article discusses the experiences of Megumu (first author) and her students as they engaged in collaborative learning (CL) in their intermediate Japanese course at an American university. CL was one of three types of teaching and learning employed in Megumu's course, but it enabled students to learn aspects of Japanese language and culture that other types of teaching and learning are not designed to accomplish. We first discuss the concept of CL from our social constructionist perspective; i.e., we see learning as a social process of knowing instead of merely a construct of individual minds (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999). This is then followed by a description of how this social constructionist perspective was incorporated in Megumu's course, based on her and students' reflections on their CL experiences. Finally, we close with an invitation to readers to explore the potential of CL in various Japanese language classroom environments.

本論では、米国大学の中級日本語のクラスで、筆者とその学生達がコラボレーティブラーニング（Collaborative learning: CL）に参加した際の経験を論じる。CLはこのクラスで用いられた3種類の教授法の1つで、学生達が日本の言語や文化を学ぶ上で、他の教授法では可能でないことを達成するのに大変役立った。本論では、まず、社会構造主義の視点に基づいたCLの概念を論じる。ここで言う社会構造主義とは、学習、知識は人間によって創られるものであり、よって学ぶ、知るという行為は社会的過程であるという思想に基づく理論である（Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999）。次に、この社会構造主義の側面が筆者のクラスでどう用いられているかを、学生達との実際の経験を振り返って叙述する。最後に、様々な日本語教育現場におけるCLの可能性を、共に探求するよう読者に提案し、終わりとする。

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A typology of teaching and learning

Peters & Armstrong (1998) developed a typology of teaching and learning in terms of purpose, flow of communication, relationship between students and teacher, and modes of discourse, among other pedagogical features. This typology consists of three types of teaching and learning: T-I, "teaching by transmission, learning by reception"; T-II, "teaching by transmission, learning by sharing"; and T-III, "collaborative learning" (CL) (pp. 78-79). In T-I, the primary focus is subject matter that reflects the experience of the teacher and related discipline-based content. The teacher is the primary source of information, and the focus is on individual learning. The flow of communication is from teacher to student; sometimes from student to teacher. Direct instruction and lectures, sometimes accompanied by demonstration, drill, and repetition, are examples of T-I.

As in T-I, the emphasis in T-II is on individual learning. One difference is that the teacher is the primary, but not the only, source of information. Students may also serve as sources of information as they are given opportunities to

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make meaning of the subject matter in terms of their own experiences. The flow of communication is from teacher to student, student to student, and student to teacher. The most familiar form of Type II is the lecture-discussion format; various applications of cooperative learning or group work also fit this model. Many educators refer to this sharing aspect as a necessary aspect of cooperative learning (e.g., Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1993). Others often use the terms *cooperative learning* and *collaborative learning* synonymously, or refer to *collaborative learning* as having what we refer to as T-II features (e.g., Bruffee, 1999).

In T-III, or CL, the emphasis is on both individual and group learning. The teacher becomes a member of the group of learners and participates with student members as they focus on the joint construction of new knowledge. The flow of communication is from member to member, member to group, and group to member. The basis of their joint action is critical reflection on the members' present, past, and anticipated experiences, augmented by disciplinary content (Peters, Doi, & Taylor, 2010).

While no one type of teaching and learning is superior to another as each has its own place in the educator's pedagogy, T-I and T-II can never escape from the issue of hierarchical authority of traditional classrooms. To begin with, one purpose of these types of teaching and learning is to socialize students into a knowledge community that is consistent with the teacher's subject matter expertise and philosophy, as well as the ways of knowing of members of his or her discipline. For example, Bruffee (1999) claims:

> [The professor] has to discover ways to help those nonmembers [i.e., students] loosen their loyalty to some of the communities they are already members of – "divorce" themselves from those communities . . . and marry instead into the knowledge community that the professor represents. (p. 78)

While a teacher using T-II may attempt to involve students and their collective experiences in terms of their own ways of knowing, students are nevertheless expected to assimilate themselves into the community that the teacher represents.

Engaging in T-III or CL helps resolve this issue of hierarchical authority associated with T-I and T-II. By positioning both the teacher and students as members of a group or co-constructors of knowledge, CL grants the authority of knowledge and knowing to students as well as the teacher. They are able to take advantage of their experiences, skills, talents, and relationships and to learn not only from others but also with their group as a whole. This process leaves room for members to create knowledge as they go along, knowledge that never before existed. In T-III, knowledge is in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction, occurring in the moment, in the context of ever-changing relationships among learners. This does not suggest that the other types of teaching and learning should be overlooked. Indeed, all three types have their own place in the classroom, and one or more types might be incorporated in teaching one class session. However, we emphasize that incorporating CL can take the classroom beyond what is possible with either of the other types alone or in combination.

CL can be incorporated into various disciplines, including foreign/second language education (Hall, Vitanova, & Marchenkova, 2005). Indeed, CL offers a different approach from a traditional and formalist perspective, viewing language as a set of dynamic living systems that are fundamentally tied to social and historical contexts of use. The traditional perspective deems language as a set of abstract and independent systems and the act of language learning as the work of an individual mind (Deutscher, 2010). In contrast, our view of CL corresponds with Voloshinov's (1973) view of language: "Language acquires life and historically evolves precisely here, in concrete verbal communication, and not in the abstract linguistic system of language forms, nor in the individual psyche of speakers" (p. 95). That is, language is neither an essential given nor a product of individual minds; rather, it is derived from and sustained by our dynamic and ongoing social interactions. This perspective suggests that knowledge is a human construction and knowing is a social process (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999). In the following section, we discuss how this social constructionist perspective was incorporated in Megumu's course. This description is based on Megumu's and the students' individual and joint reflections on their CL experiences.

Reflections on the CL experience in the Japanese language class

Megumu engaged her second-year Japanese language class in CL in the fall semester of 2009. This undergraduate course was offered in the Department of Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures at a large American university. The class schedule consisted of four 50-minute sessions per week for one semester, or 14 weeks. There were 26 class members and one instructor (Megumu). The goal of incorporating CL was to take the class beyond the usual emphasis of foreign language classrooms on practical communication, and development of the language skills of listening, reading, writing, and speaking (Hatasa, Hatasa, & Makino, 2006). Megumu acknowledged this emphasis and sought a way that would do more than just contribute to students' language development or socialize them into the knowledge community she represented. In particular, she worked with the class to jointly construct their knowledge in terms of their readings about various aspects of Japanese language and culture.

Dialogue was employed as the primary mode of learning and co-construction of knowledge. More specifically, the group sat in a circle and engaged in dialogue on readings that they had read with their partners in preceding sessions. By *dialogue*, we mean that the instructor and students communicate in order to understand each other and themselves. Self and other understanding form the basis of their joint effort to co-construct new knowledge about the reading content, language concepts, and cultural matters. Students and instructor also collectively inquire into the movement of thought and the process of working together, such as by attending to what is being created and how it is created within the group.

In the CL sessions of the Japanese class, the process of dialogue began by Megumu asking questions of the students: e.g., "What stood out to you about this reading? Which part of the reading did you find particularly striking or resonating? Which part did you continue to struggle to understand?" Megumu was also prepared to share her responses to these questions. Group members' immediate responses to these questions, and other questions and responses that followed, formed the process and outcomes of their knowledge construction. These experiences are well represented in Hanaki's (2007) descriptions of Baktin's *novelistic discourse* as being "lively, open-ended, [and] spontaneous," emerging from active interactions of the students' and instructor's lived experiences and their diverse voices (p. 11). Unlike Furr's (2007) reading circle that positions the instructor outside of the group and assigns each student a different role, the Japanese class required all members, including the instructor, to assume mutual responsibility for their constructive process.

Dialogue on a biography of Yoko Ono

In one of the CL reading sessions, the group engaged in dialogue on a biography of Yoko Ono both in Japanese and English. Of all her life experiences presented in the reading, the group's interest focused on *Cloud Piece* (1964), her poem representing a form of conceptual art, and *Ceiling Painting* (1966), her art exhibition in London where she met her third husband and longtime collaborator, John Lennon. By weaving together the utterances and responses of the members at what Kostogriz (2005) calls the *thirdplace*, the group sought to construct their own unique understandings of the meaning, significance, and relationship of these two art works. Kostogriz (2005) describes *thirdplace* as "creative ferment" (p. 197) where the border between the self and other comes together and the dynamic tension this meeting creates gives shape to learners' meaning-making and knowledge construction. This view corresponds to what Hanaki (2007) describes as *dynamic discursive space* (p. 12). One way to imagine this space or thirdplace is to "see it" in the middle of a circle of learners. This middle area serves to focus members' attention to what is being created and how it is created.

While engaging in dialogue about *Cloud Piece,* the group constructed an understanding of the poem in terms of their "ownership" of clouds. That is, the members saw that the clouds came to belong to them in the process of counting and naming the clouds. Conversations about *Ceiling Painting* led the group to understand that Yoko embraced a strong affirmation in the small, simple word "yes". The group also developed an image of the relationship between *Cloud Piece* and *Ceiling Painting* as positivity or optimism. To

members, the naming of clouds and the painting of "yes" high above indicated birth and hope, respectively. These understandings were not simple reproduction of what the group members knew in advance from the text or other related resources. Instead, the understandings were constructed between group members and with the group as a whole, as a result of engaging with others at the thirdplace and situating the reading content and the language in the context of culture, history, and politics. For example, the group explored the concept of owning in *Cloud Piece* and the significance of "yes" in *Ceiling Painting*, in relation to Yoko's multicultural backgrounds, the hippie movement in the U.S., and the Vietnam War.

In this process of knowledge construction, the class acted in ways that fostered CL, such as listening, inquiring, valuing, reflecting, and working jointly to understand themselves, others, the learning process, and the readings. Megumu served both as the primary facilitator and as a co-learner and co-constructor of knowledge. As facilitator and participant, she developed a space where all group members are respected and trusted, and helped other members by asking questions to encourage reflection on individual and collective thinking and assumptions. As co-learner, Megumu engaged in the manner that she encouraged other members to act, such as valuing multiple ways of knowing that the members brought to their learning experiences. As a result, the class as a whole was able to jointly construct their own unique understandings by utilizing and interweaving the members' experiences, skills, and newly formed relationships.

Conclusion and implications

This paper discussed a concept of CL and its implications for the foreign/second language classroom, along with an example of a CL reading session in an intermediate Japanese classroom. Megumu was able to successfully add CL (T-III) to her routine of T-I and T-II teaching and learning practice, especially in the area of readings about various aspects of Japanese culture. The primary goal of engaging in CL was co-construction of new knowledge, and language acquisition or development was a secondary goal. The former goal was achieved in class sessions devoted to readings. The latter goal was achieved in all other class sessions. Thus, we believe that CL (T-III) has a place in the Japanese language classroom, alongside the more familiar T-I and T-II types of teaching and learning.

However, there were some areas in which the benefits of CL were limited due to the composition of class members and their learning environment. Students were encouraged to speak in Japanese during dialogue; however, most of them relied on English instead of Japanese to convey their thoughts and ideas to others. Students' limited experiences with Japanese both in and outside the classroom might account for their choice of languages. This understanding suggests that students with higher levels of language proficiency benefit more from engaging in CL, especially in terms of practicing and developing their language skills. The same can be said about students who have more experience with aspects of Japanese culture, such as those living in Japan. These students might find engaging in CL more beneficial than students with less exposure to culturally enriched environments. We invite readers of this article to consider the advantages and disadvantages of CL and its role as an additional approach to teaching and learning in language classrooms, especially classrooms consisting of students with different levels of language proficiencies in diverse cultural environments.

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