When nontraditional meets traditional: Understanding nontraditional students through classroom discourse analysis

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Nontraditional students often have different learning styles and individual needs compared to their younger classmates. They are generally highly motivated and have a more fully developed set of life skills as well. In Japan, as the number of nontraditional students increases, one concern that needs to be addressed involves the learning conditions language teachers create for increasingly mixed classes of traditional and nontraditional students. This paper demonstrates how classroom discourse analysis, as a form of teacher research, can address this concern. By studying the patterns of interaction with and between students, a teacher can gain a better understanding of how nontraditional students are positioned in classroom contexts and how this positioning may afford or deny opportunities for learning. First, I discuss classroom discourse analysis and offer a few practical suggestions on how teachers can get started researching the patterns of interaction in their own classrooms. Then, I present an example of my own teacher research on classroom interaction from an oral communication class. The example illustrates how a classroom interaction between a nontraditional student and teacher fails to affirm the L2 identity a nontraditional student fashions in the conversation.

社会人学生は、一般的に動機づけが高く、成熟した生活スキルも持っているが、しばしば現役の学生とは異なった学習スタイルやニーズを持っている。日本では、社会人学生数が増加するにつれて、現役の学生と社会人学生の混合クラスの増加により語学教師が提供する学習環境の問題に取り組むことが必要になっている。本論では、教室のディスコース分析により教師リサーチとしていかにこの問題に取り組んだかを論述する。学生と教師、または学生同士のインタラクションパターンを研究することによって、教師は教室コンテクストで社会人学生がどういう位置づけなのか、また、この位置づけにより学習の機会を与えられているのか、または奪われているのかの理解を深めることができる。まず、教室のディスコース分析を議論し、教師がいかに各自の教室でインタラクションのパターンの研究を始めることができるかに対する実際的な示唆を与える。次に、著者のオーラルコミュニケーションクラスでの教室インタラクションの教師リサーチの例を提示する。この例では、社会人学生と教師との教室インタラクションがいかに会話の中で社会人学生にとって彼らのL2　アイデンティティを認めていないかを表している。

Bio Data
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Two years ago, walking through the cafeteria at my small, liberal arts university in Japan, I spotted a group of older, nontraditional students in the corner eating lunch together. Some of them I knew from my own classes. Others, I had only seen walking on campus. It was difficult to see them among the commotion of hundreds of laughing, younger,

traditional students shuffling about the cafeteria. After I noticed them that first time, I began to notice them every time I walked through the cafeteria at lunch—sitting quietly together, in the corner, isolated from the other students. This led me to wonder about the educational experiences of nontraditional students, especially their learning experiences in the English language classroom, where the majority of students are younger, traditional ones.

In this paper, I use the term *nontraditional student* (also referred to as *lifelong learner* or *adult student*) to mean students over the age of 25, usually with a work experience background. In colleges and universities in Japan, the number of these nontraditional students is increasing. This has led to an increased number of nontraditional students enrolling in our language classes—together with traditional students (students aged 18-24 and usually coming directly from high school). Therefore, for those of us teaching at the tertiary level in Japan, a concern that needs to be addressed involves the learning conditions language teachers create for classes in which both traditional and nontraditional students are enrolled. Are the conditions we create in the classroom and the pedagogical approaches we take appropriate for both groups of students?

It is has been widely documented that pedagogical approaches to teaching nontraditional students should differ from approaches used with traditional students (Hilles & Sutton, 2001; Kelly, 2004). In fact, the concept of andragogy refers to a theory of learning strategies for adults based on some of the characteristics that distinguish nontraditional students from younger, traditional students. Kelly (2004) summarizes several of these characteristics of nontraditional learners, two of which include self-directed learning and the role of experience. Self-directed learning involves students taking the initiative and responsibility in selecting and managing their own learning activities. Mirroring their self-directedness in life, nontraditional students usually prefer this kind of learning in the classroom. Furthermore, nontraditional students bring with them images, experiences, and expectations of English language learning to the classroom. Their images and perceptions need to be made more explicit and given voice in the language classroom. Therefore, how do we ensure that our institutional/classroom environments and our pedagogical approaches accommodate nontraditional students in environments where traditional and nontraditional students co-exist?

I address this question by suggesting teachers analyze the discourse of their classrooms in order to understand how patterns of interactions and talk may accommodate the participation and learning opportunities for some, while restricting opportunities for others. Analyzing classroom discourse is a way to develop what is called *interactional awareness*. Rex and Schiller (2009) note: "A teacher who is interactionally aware understands that teachers and students act upon and influence each other when they talk together. Such understanding enables teachers to reflect upon how they create classroom conditions that encourage equitable learning" (p. ix). In other words, the dynamics of a classroom may privilege and empower some while silencing others, so it is imperative that our pedagogical choices do not constrain the learning opportunities for different groups such as nontraditional students.

To develop interactional awareness, teachers must investigate the interactions and discourse of their own classroom ecologies because as multiple discourses come together, they create and deny positions for language learners. In order for second language students to have successful learning experiences, they must acquire the language as well as the behaviors, attitudes, resources, and ways of engaging needed to recognizably display the identity of a successful English language student. Rex and Schiller (2009) explain, "If we want students to assume particular identities, then we must be aware of how we position them and what we say, which over time creates identities that students adopt" (p. 21). This is especially relevant for nontraditional students because while they already have a great deal invested in their identities as speakers of their first language, they are also in the process of acquiring new identities as second language speakers. Studying nontraditional students in the UK, for example, Lea and West (1995) report that, "Embarking upon higher education is to be seen as part of managing change and seeking a new identity in which revising a self-narrative—the story one tells of oneself and one's personal history—is central to the process" (p. 177).

In this paper, I first discuss nontraditional students in Japan. Then I discuss classroom discourse analysis and offer a few practical suggestions on how teachers can get started on researching their own classroom discourse. Finally, I discuss an example of my own research on classroom discourse from an oral communication class. The example illustrates how a classroom conversation immediately following an instructional period fails to affirm the L2 identities a nontraditional student fashioned in the conversation.

Nontraditional students in Japan

The number of nontraditional students, or *shakaijin gakusei,* is increasing in institutes of higher education in Japan. In July 2008, the Japanese journal *Gendai no Koutoukyouiku* (Contemporary Higher Education) devoted a special issue to the topic of nontraditional students. In the field of English language teacher education, Rugen (2008) reports on the increase of nontraditional students in teacher preparation programs in Japan. And at the graduate level, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) reports a steady increase in the number of nontraditional students across Japan. In 2008, for the first time ever, over 20% of the total enrollment in graduate schools were nontraditional students (MEXT, 2008).

Yamamoto (2001) describes how reforms in higher education are challenging traditional principles such as higher education being only for the young. For example, the concept of lifelong learning is helping to establish institutes of higher education in Japan as a legitimate place for nontraditional students. Such reforms have at least two implications. First, they help universities make up for shrinking enrollments. And second, they stimulate efforts to improve teaching and research in higher education. In other words, nontraditional students may be less concerned with a degree per se and more concerned with the practical knowledge and skills gained from their learning, which may ultimately lead to higher expectations and demands for quality teaching (Yamamoto, 2001).

Despite this, dominant frameworks for identity research have not considered the complex identities, shaped by life experiences, of the nontraditional college student (Kasworm, 2005). This paper addresses this limitation by suggesting that classroom discourse analysis, conducted by practicing language teachers, can provide a useful framework for understanding the social interactions that mold the complex identities of nontraditional students.

Analyzing classroom discourse and teacher research

Traditionally, teachers and administrators have focused on what students are physically doing and producing in a classroom. Measurements of learning have been based on grades, tests, student work, and judgments about behavior. Social constructionist perspectives of learning, on the other hand, assume that knowledge and meaning are constructed in social interactions through linguistic practices and discourses rather than solely in the meaning-making activity of the mind. This perspective has informed a line of inquiry which focuses on the analysis of classroom discourse, the language that teachers and students use to communicate with each other in the classroom. The purpose of classroom discourse research is to help inform the pedagogical choices teachers make by understanding the patterns of interactions in a classroom. When teachers develop an interactional awareness through the analysis of classroom discourse, they are in a better position to make the appropriate pedagogical choices to improve their own classroom interactions and ultimately student learning.

The social nature of language learning suggests the importance of engaging the identities of language learners in the classroom. Furthermore, the idea of learner investment has been identified as an important social condition in a language-learning context (Peirce, 1995). This is especially true for nontraditional students. For them, all new experiences are "symbolized and organized into some relationship to the self, or ignored because there is no perceived relationship" (Kidd, 1973, p. 127). Thus, when language learning is meaningful to nontraditional students' sense of who they are, voluntary participation and investment in language learning becomes possible. In other words, what students learn is closely related to how they learn. Therefore, it

has been suggested that, "educational research might focus not so much on assessing individual 'uptake' of particular knowledge or skills but rather on the social structures in particular communities and on the variety of positionings available for learners to occupy in those communities" (Norton & Toohey, 2002, p. 119).

Classroom discourse analysis does just that—it looks at the structures of talk in classroom communities and seeks to understand the positions that are being constructed for learners. Rex and Schiller (2009) note: "By becoming aware of the complex negotiations students work through to adopt academic identities, we can consider how to act as teachers within those negotiations" (p. 106). How to act means making the necessary adjustments in the language we use and in the pedagogical choices we make. Ultimately, these choices should help to better engage nontraditional learners. Finally, because of the importance of self-reflection in this process, it seems natural that teachers, rather than outside researchers, be the ones conducting the research. In the past, classroom research was conducted mostly by outsiders; today, however, teachers play a central role in such research, acting as partners in research projects or as the sole producers of language classroom research (Crookes, 1998).

The following sections include some simple, practical suggestions to get started with classroom discourse analysis. The three recommendations include: 1) recording an actual class lesson; 2) recording a student-teacher conference; and, 3) recording the interactions immediately before and/or after a class. In each case, an audio or video recorder can be used for the recording, before the transcription and analysis. The suggestions are from Rex and Schiller (2009) and adapted to reflect our interest in nontraditional students. Following these suggestions should help teachers immediately improve their classroom interactions.

Class lesson recording

The assumptions we hold about students are sometimes not consciously recognized. Furthermore, these assumptions may influence how we interact with traditional and nontraditional students. Rex and Schiller (2009) note: "When you can see how your assumptions about your students play out in your class through talk, then it is easier to see how certain roles and relationships become established" (p. 15). It is also easier to then reshape those roles we unconsciously ascribe to students. First, write down some of the assumptions you have of traditional and nontraditional students. Write down some assumptions you believe traditional students and nontraditional students have about you. Then record 1-2 class lessons. After the recording, listen and pay attention to clues that might signal your assumptions about your students. What is the exact language you used?

Student-teacher conference recording

Individual conferences with students are common—especially in composition courses. They are a way to individualize the process of learning to write, while providing valuable personalized instruction. If we want students to assume particular L2 identities (e.g., the confident writer, the inquisitive writer) over time, then we must be careful how we position them in conferences too. Tape record and transcribe a student conference with a nontraditional student. What evidence can you find that indicates the identity the student wants to put forward? What evidence can you find that indicates the identity you ascribe to the student? Do they match? Does the identity you ascribe to the student through talk match the student's self in that moment? How can you tell? If it doesn't match, what language choices are available that allow for more congruent positionings to emerge?

Before and/or after class recording

Classroom talk does not begin and end with the bell. In my case, I often interact with students before and after class. This time is especially valuable for getting to know students. For this recording, start the recorder early and let it run late. Record the interactions you have with students as they enter the classroom and any interactions you have immediately after a class. Note the interactions and language used between you and nontraditional students, as well as between you and traditional students.

Example: Classroom Discourse Analysis

Over the last two years, I have been systematically analyzing my own classroom discourse in situations with mixed classes of traditional and nontraditional students. The following is an example of this research based on an excerpt of talk immediately following an oral communication class I taught (suggestion 3 above).

The excerpt is a conversation between three students and me. Kenta (pseudonym) is a nontraditional student. Tomoki and Sachiko (pseudonyms) are traditional students. The conversation starts with Kenta describing to me his experience of quitting his job as a manager of a chain restaurant in Tokyo and traveling to Los Angeles to study English before entering the university. Tomoki and Sachiko were lingering in the classroom and naturally joined the conversation. There are three points I would like to discuss from the excerpt, which is included in its entirety in Appendix B. Appendix A includes the transcription conventions used.

First, it is interesting to note Kenta's associations with English language learning and teaching. Early in the excerpt, he tells a story about teaching English to an exchange student working part-time at his restaurant. Consider the following exchange (Participants: K—Kenta, B—Brian, T—Tomoki, S—Sachiko):

(4) K: […] And one of the, one of the staff, p-
(5) part-time staff, one of the part-time staff was, uh, exchange student,
(6) exchange student in- from China=
(7) B: =Oh yea?
(8) K: Yes. And one day I (1.0) I taught English to, to her.
(9) All: Mmm
(10) K: Exactly, I translated some documents for her. Documents for her and send,
(11) send to her. (0.5) And I, and <u>I really</u> enjoyed that work.

Note the association of translation (line 10) to English language learning and teaching. A few lines later (lines 16-23), he tells another brief narrative about helping "unknown users of English" with their English grammar on an online discussion board. Again, there is a telling association, this time that of the teaching of grammar with English language learning and teaching. Finally, in lines 26-60, Kenta tells another story about a neutral, if not negative, experience of studying abroad at an adult English school (lines 26-60). He explains how he was the only Japanese student in an advanced class of immigrant students who spoke English very well, and, as a result, he lost confidence in his English.

For Kenta, the positive experiences associated with traditional methods of language education (grammar-translation methods) help define his L2 identity in the interaction. It seems this L2 identity is based more on the positive experiences gleaned from teaching grammar and/or helping with translation than with studying abroad.

Second, for the other conversation participants (Tomoki, Sachiko, and Brian), there does seem to be a strong correlation between studying abroad and one's level of English proficiency. In lines 62-73, the three co-construct this correlation when Brian asks Tomoki if he has ever studied abroad. Tomoki explains that he has not, but that his friend has, and, as a result, she "can speak very well" (line 67). This suggests a correlation between the friend's high level of proficiency and her opportunity to study abroad.

Despite Kenta's own somewhat negative study abroad experience, the trajectory of the conversation at this point suggests a correlation between studying abroad and the successful English language learner. Thus, there may be a danger of neglecting to affirm the positive life experiences and identities that Kenta brings to the classroom and, as such, a danger of positioning Kenta as an unsuccessful language learner.

This brings me to the third point I would like to discuss. Toward the end of the conversation, it does seem as if Kenta becomes more complicit with this emerging trajectory regarding the benefits of studying abroad. Consider the following lines, which begin with Brian asking about Kenta's wife:

(79) B: Can she speak English?
(80) K: Ah, yes, yes.
(81) B: Really?
(82) K: Mm, yea. maybe better than me. [(hh)
(83) T/S: [Ahh. (hh).

(84) B: No, no: your English is great.

(85) S: *Ne:* {Yea}.

(86) K: >Yea, she stayed < in< Canada.

(87) B: Oh, okay.

(88) K: Yea, she has stayed in Canada before. But maybe never been to United States.

Here, it is Kenta who offers the correlation between one's proficiency and studying abroad. He could have ended his contributions after line 82. However, his contributions in lines 86 and 88 follow the emerging trajectory of the conversation. Therefore, if Kenta is indeed complicit with this emerging trajectory, is there a danger he might feel less successful as a learner due to his previously fashioned identity (a learner with an unsuccessful study abroad experience)?

What can be learned from this excerpt? I learned that our classroom talk did not affirm the life experiences and identities Kenta put forward in the interaction, which is problematic. As Kelly (2004) notes, "adults need to connect learning to their lifetime of experience and be acknowledged for it" (p. 23). Furthermore, it has been shown that L2 identities are closely linked to investment in language learning (Peirce, 1995). Therefore, if I hope to nurture Kenta's investment in language learning, I must choose alternative language and ways of interacting, which more closely recognize Kenta's identities as productive to the language learning process. For example, I might return to the events of grammar teaching and translation that Kenta described and show further interest with follow-up questions. Or I might describe how an experience of learning Japanese through a particular translation method helped me progress with my own language learning. In either case my language choices would allow Kenta to positively identify with one type of language learning experience (grammar-translation) rather than negatively identifying with another (study abroad), thus supporting his investment in the learning process.

Conclusion

Analysis of classroom discourse offers the possibility of understanding nontraditional students in new ways and of understanding mixed (traditional and nontraditional students) English language classes as complex ecological systems where such awareness can foster emergent identities in the situated process of learning a language. As language teachers, we must remember that *what* our students learn is closely linked to *how* they learn. This paper also argues that classroom discourse analysis be conducted by teachers and for teachers. Ultimately, it is hoped this kind of research empowers individual teachers in their own unique contexts to make appropriate language and pedagogical choices when working with nontraditional students.

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Appendix A. Transcription Conventions

(0.0) Pause or silence, estimated to the nearest tenth of a second

= Latching of successive talk

[ ] Overlapping speech, with the utterances vertically aligned and marked with brackets

: Elongation of prior syllable

↑ Rising intonation

↓ Falling intonation

____ Emphasis (underline)

>< Accelerated talk

< > Drawn out talk

(hh) Laughter

(( )) Talk unclear or inaudible

Italics Utterance in Japanese

{ } Comments by transcriber including English translations

Appendix B. Excerpt 1

Participants: K—Kenta, B—Brian, T—Tomoki, S—Sachiko

(1) K: Maybe in the 5th year of my, my career as the store manager at XYZ {Restaurant pseudonym},

(2) I was in, I was working as a manager in the shop in Kayabacho,

(3) B: Mmm.

(4) K: Near, near Tokyo stock market. (1.0) And one of the, one of the staff, p-

(5) part-time staff, one of the part-time staff was, uh, exchange student,

(6) exchange student in- from China=

(7) B: =Oh yea?

(8) K: Yes. And one day I (1.0) I taught English to, to her.

(9) All: Mmm

(10) K: Exactly, I translated some documents for her. Documents for her and send,

(11) send to her. (0.5) And I, and I really enjoyed that work.

(12) T: Eh? Same company worker?

(13) K: *Un*. {Yes}. Same staff. And, yea, I noticed I like, I like studying and I like English,

(14) and also I liked [helping her.

(15) B: [Gre::at.

(16) K: And around that time, I bought, uh, my personal computer. And I wrote in, I

(17) wrote in some, (1.0) I, I surfed some sites: and stopped at the community

(18) sites where many, many users are (0.5) teaching each other in, in many

(19) categories. And in the category, there, there was are English grammar

(20) category, and I begin to teach (0.5)=

(21) B: =Oh, [cool

(22) K: [unkno- grammar to unknown users of English. And, that, that was also a

(23) fun experience.

(24) B: Wow, that's wonderful

(25) K: From then on I:: I thought of , thought of returning to school seriously. And

(26) then after, uh, after half a year, I decided to quit my job and go to L.A.

(27) T/S: *Eh*:: {Wow}

(28) B: You went to L.A. first?

(29) K: Uh, (2.0). Uh:: yea, last mon- last year: the end of October to December

(30) 14th, I went to Los Angeles a:nd, >yea, but< I didn't have (1.0) plan. Yea,

(31) just I had friend in Los Angeles. And, yea, I asked him to: (1.0) something,

(32) uh: I have no confidence to speaking English (hh), so I want to, I wanna go to

(33) Los Angeles and studying, studying English with, with no money (hh).

(34) B/K: (hh).

(35) Y: Yea, and my friend, uh, he, he didn't know much about the school but

(36) he had some information about adult school and he said uh:: maybe,
(37) maybe you can.
(38) B: Ah:. Like a private language school?
(39) K: Yea, maybe.
(40) All: Mm:
(41) K: And I:: I believed that and I will go. So, I quit my job and just fly to Los Angeles
(42) with almost nothing, (hh) almost no, no plan.
(43) T: Wow, you are strong (hh).
(44) K: And after that I:: I:: when I reached in Los Angeles, I: researched, I
(45) searched in the Internet and I, yea, I'm very fortunate, fortunately I found
(46) the school ↑ . It's adult school and I went, I went, I attended the class every
(47) day, uh:: from nine to three and sometimes nine to five.
(48) T: *Ii ne*. {That's great}.
(49) K: Before I went there, I have very (0.5) kind of negative=
(50) B: Mmm, mm.
(51) K: to:: for Japanese to speaking English ↑ , but, I have some, courage (hh) to go there.
(52) B: Mmm
(53) K: But, uh, and there are a lot of, a lot of immigrants in L.A.- L.A., and that school is for the,
(54) for that kind of people, I think. And they, I was in the top class (hh). And there were no
(55) other Japanese students and, uh, there were a lot of (0.5) the nationality is very diverse, and
(56) everyone can speak very well. Uh, I thought Japanese is not so good at speaking English.
(57) B: Mm: yea, I don't know (1.0). Did you enjoy your time there?
(58) K: Mm, maybe. But, I lost my confidence=
(59) B: =Ah::
(60) K: little bit.
(61) T/S: Mm::
(62) B: Tomoki, you've studied abroad?
(63) T: No, but my friend (1.2)
(64) B: Your friend studied abroad?
(65) T: *Un*. Yes. She studied in United- ↑
(66) B/K: Mm::
(67) T: She is good English speaker.
(68) S: *Urayamashii* {I'm jealous}.
(69) B: Shonan campus?
(70) T: Yea, but different class.
(71) All: Mmm
(72) T: Maybe she's in top class now. [A1
(73) B: [A1
(74) {1.5}
(75) B: {To Kenta} Did your wife visit you in Los Angeles?
(76) K: No:
(77) B: Has she ever been to LA?
(78) K: Maybe no.
(79) B: Can she speak English?
(80) K: Ah, yes, yes.
(81) B: Really?
(82) K: Mm, yea. maybe better than me. [(hh)
(83) T/S: [Ahh. (hh).
(84) B: No, no: your English is great.
(85) S: *Ne:* {Yea}.
(86) K: >Yea, she stayed in< Canada.
(87) B: Oh, okay.
(88) K: Yea, she has stayed in Canada before. But maybe never been to United States.
(89) B: Ah: and her job now she doesn't [use English?
(90) K: [doesn't, yea
(91) B: Ah:
(92) K: She, she is computer (hh), she=
(93) B: Oh, yea?
(94) K: Yea::
(95) B: Like a computer engineer [or something?
(96) K: [Engineer, yea, yea.
(97) B: Mm::