Changing perspectives of language learning: Development through interaction

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Research in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has attempted to understand learning from a product-oriented perspective. Moreover, teachers and researchers have positioned language learning as linear by using pre-post tests to confirm the occurrence of language learning. However, consensus has started to build that language use and development are far more complex and dynamic (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), and it is necessary to focus on the process of learning at the micro-level to understand the process learners undergo when acquiring language (Hellermann, 2008). Using conversation analysis (CA) as the primary research methodology, this study analyzes longitudinal multilingual interactions outside the classroom in Japan. Findings demonstrate the participants adapting to the conversational environment by selecting a shared reference. The study brings a holistic angle to an understanding of language learning as well as to implications for the classroom.

　第二言語習得(SLA)分野における多くの研究は「学習(learning)」をプロダクトアウトの視点から理解しようとしてきた。さらに、教師や研究者は言語学習を線形と考え、pre-postテストにより学習を量ってきた。しかし、少しずつではあるが、言語学習は複雑でダイナミックであるという考えが浸透しつつある(Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008)。そしてその際、学習過程をミクロ的に分析する必要があるということについても理解されつつある(Hellermann, 2008)。本稿は会話分析 (conversation analysis)を使用し、日本における多言語・教室外会話を縦断的に分析した。分析の結果、学習者が会話環境へ適応しながら共通言語を選ぶ過程が明らかになった。また、当該研究は「言語学習」のより包括的な定義を考察するとともに授業への示唆を提供する。

RESEARCH IN the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is still dominated by cognitive psychological studies. Many of these studies start by considering language competence as an innate and implicit knowledge of language which all native speakers have (Chomsky, 1986). 'Learning' in cognitive psychological studies is defined as changes happening only in the learners' mind (cf. Lightbrown & Spada, 1993).

Although this research has provided some understanding of the relationship between learner and language, it has been disputed for its lack of holistic understanding of the relationship between learner and language (Firth & Wagner, 1997, 2007). The current study addresses two main weaknesses of cognitive psychological studies dominating the field of SLA.

The first weakness is its conceptualization of the learner as a cognitive individual. Learning in the cognitive sense has investigated only decontextualized output data collection in laboratories or using measurement tools. These 'mainstream' SLA studies have focused only on the

output of the learners to determine whether 'learning' has occurred. However, the validity of these measurement instruments have been questioned (Norris & Ortega, 2003). In addition, this type of research method has limited our understanding of the learning process. In order to understand 'how' learning happens, it is therefore necessary to scrutinize discrete processes of linguistic gains and components.

To overcome these weaknesses, an increasing number of researchers have started to examine the developmental process from a holistic perspective in the moment-by-moment interaction of learners (cf. Ohta, 2000). In these studies, learners are not considered "processors of input, nor producers of output, but as speakers/hearers involved in developmental processes which are realized in interaction" (Ohta, 2000, p. 51). Thus 'learning' is not only happening in the individual mind of the learner but also occurs in the interactive environment. Despite this collection of research, however, little is known about the process of understanding and learning an L2 word, especially in naturally occurring multilingual English as a Foreign Language (EFL) interactions.

The second weakness with cognitive SLA studies is the positioning of the learner as an individual aiming towards the goal of becoming a native speaker. Many SLA researchers would compare their language learners' output with so-called native speaker norms to measure their development or 'learning.' However, as Cook (2001) reminds researchers and teachers, the goal of SLA is not to foster native speakers, but rather successful bilingual or multilingual users. Especially in an EFL context such as Japan, it is more possible for Japanese users of English to be interacting in English with other users of English as an additional language. In these natural interactions outside the classroom, the goal is not set to mimic native speakers; the target standards are not fixed and organic (van Lier, 2000). Therefore, in EFL contexts, language use and language learning

should be more collaborative and creative than what the current 'mainstream' studies define. However, with the limitations of current SLA research, these organic phenomena have traditionally been understood as errors or failures of learning, thus limiting our understanding of the evolving language learning process of learners.

The present study therefore aims to widen our perspectives of the process of learning in multicultural interaction outside the classroom and define the term 'learning' from a more holistic perspective of SLA.

The study

The study takes place at a university dormitory in Japan. There are approximately 3000 residents in this dormitory, approximately half of the residents are Japanese and the other half are international students from approximately 90 countries around the world. The majority of the students, however, are from the Asia Pacific region, such as China, Korea, India, Vietnam, and Thailand.

The two participants in this case study are Ami from Japan (L1 Japanese), and Hang from Vietnam (L1 Vietnamese), both of whom are freshman students at the university living in the same dormitory. Ami initially volunteered for the research project. She then invited Hang, who lives in the same dormitory, to join.

The recordings were done in the dormitory using a video camera. Conversations between the two participants were recorded once a month for approximately 30 minutes each, over the course of four months. Instructions by the researcher was limited only on the length of the recording and positioning of the camera, and conversation topics were decided by the participants. The first recording took place in April 2010, during the first few weeks the two participants entered the university and moved into the dormitory. Subsequent recordings were made

in the following consecutive months of May, June, and July of 2010. The data introduced in this study are from the recordings made in April and June.

The video recordings were transcribed using the transcription conventions adapted from Jefferson (2004) (see Appendix). The data were then analyzed using conversation analysis (CA) (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). When using the methodological approach of CA, a data-driven approach of CA-for-SLA was used, where the analyses are not theory driven but data driven and language learning is an observable set of practices and action deployed in social action (Jenks, 2010).

An emic and unmotivated observation and analysis of the data (ten Have, 1999) shows that the participants adapted to the interactional context by changing their language use and showed evidence of collaborative learning by adapting to the interactive context.

Data analysis

Excerpt 1 shown below is taken from the recording in April. The two subjects were discussing a Japanese food, *natto* (fermented soybeans), and Ami tries to explain that *natto* could be eaten in a sushi form wrapped with rice and seaweed, which is called *nori* in Japanese. The approximately one-minute excerpt is broken down into three segments (Excerpts 1~3). Excerpt 1 begins 29 minutes into the conversation, after Hang asks the color of *natto*.

Table 1. Excerpt 1 (April 19, 2010/ 29:06~30:02)

```
01  Ami:   Oh::: so rice and uh (.) sea woo sea woo

02  Hang:  Sea woo?

03  Ami:   Nori eheheh Do you know nori? Uh bla black
```

```
04         black (.) ah::((making square shape with fingers))

05  Hang:  [Black?
```


Figure 1. *Nori* gesture (line 4)

In line 1, Ami repeats "sea woo" initiating a next turn repair. However, Hang repeats Ami's final word with a rising intonation and displays her incomprehension of Ami's intentions (line 2). Here we can say that the word "sea woo" is displayed as a trouble source.

In response to Hang, Ami uses her linguistic resource of Japanese to describe the object (line 3), and then laughs. According to Wilkinson (2007), this could be understood as displaying or hiding her incompetence. In his study of aphasia patients, he found the patients laughing "within a self-initiated repair sequence at a point where the speaker has failed to produce a self-repair despite a prolonged attempt" (p. 542). Thus, marking the failure of the repair attempt. This is similar to what is

happening in line 1 where Ami has a prolonged self-initiated repair, which is unsuccessful. She also fails to receive a next turn repair in line 2 from Hang. Ami then self-repairs line 3, though in Japanese, with laughter. This laughter could be interpreted as Ami marking the failure of the repair attempt in English and displaying her incompetence or hiding her incompetence in English of the intended word through laughter.

Although displaying incompetence, Ami continues trying to search for a common understanding and shared reference for the object by using other available resources such as color and gesture in referring to the object in focus (lines 3-4). Nevertheless, Hang displays her incomprehension again by repeating Ami's final word in isolation and with a rising intonation (line 5).

Ami was not successful in communicating her intentions clearly in Excerpt 1. Still, she uses various resources available such as her L1, gestures, and references to color in describing the object in discussion. The two participants continue negotiating as shown in Excerpt 2.

Table 2. Excerpt 2 (April 19, 2010/ 29:06~30:02)

```
05  Hang: [Black?
06  Ami:  [To today you you we
07  Hang: ↑Ah [((stands up))
08  Ami:  [You you make uh you made this
09  Hang: Yeah
10  Ami:  Yeah
11  Hang: Maybe I don't know how to call it Japanese
12        ((sound of plastic bag rustling))
13  Ami:  Uh ↑yeah((points at Hang))How to say in English?
```

```
14  Hang: Uh:: I don't know ((brings seaweed package))
15  Ami:  Sea sea
16  Hang: Uh ((reading package))
17  Ami:  Sea woo no?
18  Hang: What is name?
19  Ami:  Nori((pointing at package))
20  Hang: Nori
21  Ami:  Nori=
22  Hang: =No:::ri oh:: it's that's sea right?
23        ((pointing at package))
24  Ami:  Yeah
```

Ami in lines 6 and 8 refers to a previous shared experience that occurred before the recording by saying "today" and "you made this". Ami is using additional resources available in finding a common understanding of the object in focus.

Hang then shows her change of state (Heritage, 1984) by an "Ah" (line 7) and brings the actual object in discussion (line 14). Although Ami failed to produce the target word, Hang showed her cognition by the change of state and action. In line 13, Ami sees the object and gives an affirmative reaction of "yeah" and points to the object. This confirms that Hang has brought the object Ami was referring to. The interaction from line 7 to line 13 demonstrates that Ami and Hang were able to develop a mutual understanding of the object in focus without a shared reference and by using other available resources such as gesture, color, shared experience, and the actual object.

Figure 2. *Nori* realia (line 14)

What is interesting about Excerpt 2 is the process the partici-pants take in selecting the shared reference. In lines 11 and 14 Hang displays her incompetence of the word in both English and Japanese. By stating "I don't know how to call it in Japa-nese" (line 11) and asking "What is name?" (line 18) followed by Ami's modeling the word in Japanese, Hang positions Ami as the Japanese expert. On the other hand, Ami asks Hang "How to say in English?" (line 13). Although Hang fails to provide a preferred response (Pomerantz, 1984) to Ami's request we can observe Ami positioning Hang as the English expert. Fur-thermore, from Ami and Hang asking each other the word in English and Japanese, and not Vietnamese - Hang's L1, it can be interpreted that the two are showing their orientation toward this interaction as a Japanese and English learning opportunity.

This interpretation can be further supported by the sequence in line 19-21. Ami models the word *nori* in line 19, Hang repeats (line 20), and Ami provides correction or confirmation by modeling again (line 21). This can be understood as an Initiation Response Feedback (IRF) sequence (Coulthard, 1985; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) often observed in classroom teacher-student interactions.

From examining these turns in interaction, this conversa-tion may appear as if it is a mundane dormitory conversation. However, from the detailed analysis of their interaction, the two are seen as displaying their orientation to this conversation as a language learning opportunity. Similar interactions can be observed in the following excerpt.

Table 3. Excerpt 3 (April 19, 2010/ 29:06～30:02)

24	Ami:	Yeah
25	Hang:	*Kore*
26	Ami:	*Yaki* means uh::::
27	Hang:	Grill
28	Ami:	Gru grill
29	Hang:	Mm
30	Ami:	Grill so *nori*
31	Hang:	↑Ah::::
32	Ami:	°*Nori*°
33	Hang:	*Nori*
34	Ami:	Yeah
35	Hang:	Ah::::
36	Ami:	Mmm
37	Hang:	<u>*No*</u>::<u>*ri*</u> [ahhh ((pointing to package))
38	Ami:	[*Nori*

In line 26, Ami tries to explain the meaning of *yaki*. However, by using the gap filler "uh" she initiates a next turn repair. Hang then repairs (line 27) and Ami repeats what Hang says (line 27-28). This again can be understood as an IRF sequence. On a similar note, lines 32 to 34 could be seen as an IRF sequence where Ami is initiating the target word *nori*, Hang responds by repeating the word, and Ami provides positive assessment, "Yeah" (line 34).

Although Ami was not able to learn the English equivalent for the object (i.e., seaweed), Ami and Hang were successful in finding a common understanding and thus labeling the target object. In doing so, Ami used multiple verbal and non-verbal resources such as using gestures, describing color, using her L1, and referring to previous experiences. Hang also collaboratively orients to the context as a language learning opportunity using realia, requesting a translation, and utilizing the IRF sequence. Through the learning process she was able to find a label for the black object as *nori*. Despite the critiques the IRF sequence in the classroom has received, such as failing to create opportunities for genuine interaction, Seedhouse (1996) points out the significance of IRF sequence in the L1 learning at home. Seedhouse argues that it is impossible for classroom interactions to be equivalent to free conversation, and teachers should not feel guilty in using IRF sequences in their language classrooms. To support his argument, he raises examples of the caregiver using the IRF sequences in teaching L1 at home. Similar to Seedhouse's argument, the current study presents the significance of IRF sequences in L2 learning in naturally occurring contexts between peers in the dormitory.

Excerpt 4 was recorded two months later in June 2010. From analyzing Ami and Hang's interaction two months later, we can confirm that Hang has learned the word *nori*. The excerpt starts 16 minutes into the recording when the two were talking about Ami's trip to Korea during the break.

Table 4. Excerpt 4 (June 8, 2010/ 16:45∼17:01)

```
01   Hang:   Ho you bought kimchi?

02   Ami:    Mm

03   Hang:   And (.) any other?

04   Ami:    >Yeah< nori:?

05   Hang:   Nori?=

06   Ami:    =Kim ah Korean nori

07   Hang:   Noodle?

08   Ami:    .Su:: ((pointing to something)) see: no sea::::

09           °nori::°

10   Hang:   ↑Ah nori ah:: °okay°=

11   Ami:    =Sea:::

12   Hang:   Ah the cover?

13   Ami:    Yeah bra [black

14   Hang:            [mmmm
```

Ami in line 4 raises her intonation after *nori* indicating it is a possible trouble source, and Hang in the next turn responds with a rising intonation showing that she does not understand Ami's previous turn (line 5).

Ami then uses available resources such as gesture in pointing to the object, *nori*, in Hang's room to refer to past experience and her partial knowledge "sea" in English (line 8). Then Ami uses her L1 "*nori*" (line 9) again similar to the way she used her L1 in Excerpt 1 line 3.

Although Hang does not understand Ami's intentions initially, Hang shows her change in state (Heritage, 1984)l1 by responding with a rising "Ah," showing change of state, repeating the word *nori*, and "okay" in line 10. Hang then displays her

understanding by referring to the previous talk about the sushi roll and refers to the seaweed as a "cover" (line 12).

Figure 3. Pointing to *nori* in the room (line 8)

Again, using the affordances such as previous shared experience, gesture, and other languages, Ami and Hang are able to build a common understanding of Ami's intentions. In addition, for Hang to be able to present her cognition of *nori* as a "cover" (line 12) and with the use of less turn taking that was needed in coming to a consensus of the word *nori*, we can deduce that Hang had learned the word from the previous conversation in April 2010.

Towards a holistic perspective

Analyzing Excerpt 1 from a cognitive or a positivistic perspective, it could be surmised that Ami fails to learn the word 'seaweed.' In the same way, Excerpt 2 line 7 might suggest that Hang fails to recall the learned word *nori* and, therefore, from a cognitive perspective she has not acquired the word. However, from a holistic perspective, as analyzed above, it can be interpreted that learning was taking place.

Learning from a holistic perspective is different from what 'mainstream' SLA researchers claim. It is a collaborative effort where the two participants are independent agents, approximating from both sides by trialing and using the affordances in developing a shared or a more approximated understanding of the counterpart's language use and meaning. For instance, we observed the two participants utilizing gestures, L1, realia, shared experiences, the IRF sequence, and most importantly orienting to the interaction as a language learning context.

In a multicultural interaction where English is neither of the participants' L1, the participants will use other available resources, in this case Japanese which is the language of their living context, in order to approximate their knowledge of a particular object name. Therefore, learning from a holistic perspective can be interpreted as a collaborative effort utilizing various affordances in negotiation, thus leading to a shared understanding.

Similar definitions of learning can be found in some other approaches to language learning. From an ecological approach to language learning, "perceptual and social activity of the learner, and particularly the verbal and nonverbal interaction in which the learner engages, are central to an understanding of learning. In other words, they do not just facilitate learning, they *are* learning in a fundamental way"(van Lier, 2000).

Furthermore, from a complexity theory perspective of language and language learning, "learning is not the taking in of linguistic forms by learners, but the constant adaptation of their linguistic resources in the service of meaning-making in response to the affordances that emerge in the communicative situation" (Larsen-Freeman, 2010, p. 135). Utilizing various affordances available and adapting to the interactional context, Ami and Hang were able to create a mutual understanding and select a common label, *nori*, for the object in focus. This suggests that there are good grounds for adopting a holistic perspective of learning.

Implications for classroom teaching

What implications does this understanding of learning have for language teachers? Van Lier (2000) raises the point that information gap activities need to be reconsidered. The information gap activity limits the information each student has and can show in order to force learners to produce the target grammar form. Although this activity is useful in its own way, by restricting the available resources, such as indication gestures, the learning process may not be triggered in full. As seen in the excerpts of this paper, the participants were using many gestures in negotiation, including pointing.

Another area that needs reconsideration is oral assessment. Conversation assessments are common practices in classrooms, both teacher-student and student-student conversation assessments. However, commonly used rubrics for assessing these interactions do not incorporate scaffolding aspects of the interaction in which participants support each other.

From the author's personal experience, in grading student-student pair conversation assessment where the grading was based on students' production accuracy and amount, the teacher had to discourage one of the participants from helping their partner use correct grammar and vocabulary since it would affect the grade and would be unfair to other pairs who did not get scaffolding support from their counterpart. However, from the perspective of learning introduced in this article, by discontinuing the scaffolding act of the students, the instructor interrupted the participants' learning opportunity. The grading rubric did not take into account of, or give any credit to the dynamics of the interaction and collaborative effort in continuing the conversation or interview. In resolving this issue, oral grading rubrics may need to be modified to incorporate the collaborative aspects of interactive dynamics.

Final remarks

This paper suggests a change in researchers' and teachers' perspectives of learning from a perspective which only focuses on the individual and decontextualized output toward a perspective which incorporates the negotiation process of learners in interaction utilizing various affordances from both counterparts and reaching a mutual understanding. In supporting this definition, I have analyzed linguistic objects within interaction to show how learners orient to, adapt, use affordances, and learn a common language in order to accomplish a social action. The participants displayed the trouble source when their word choice was not generalizable to the new context. Then by collaborating through utilization of various resources such as gestures, shared experience, realia, L1, and the IRF sequence, the participants were successful in reaching an understanding and selecting a shared reference, which could be defined as learning.

Data presented in this study are limited and, therefore, generalizations cannot be made. However, continuing SLA research, which only focuses on decontextualised individual output and compares it to native speaker norms, has clear limitations. In order to expand our understanding of the process of language learning, there is a need for more research from a holistic perspective that focuses on the moment-to-moment interaction as well as the larger linguistic environment in which the language is being used.

Bio data

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Appendix

Transcription conventions

`(.)`	Short untimed pause.
`(0.3), (2.6)`	Duration of silence in seconds.
↑`word`, ↓`word`	Pitch rise or fall in the next phrase.
`A:  word [word` `B:     [word`	Overlapping talk.
`Ha ha, huh, heh, hnh`	Laughter, depending on the sounds produced.
`.hhh`	A dot-prefixed row indicates in breath.
`wo:::rd`	Colons show extension of the sound before it.
w<u>o</u>rd	Underscoring indicates some form of stress
`A: word=` `B: =word`	Latching speech
`°word°`	Utterance that is quieter than the surrounding talk.
`>word word<`	Inwards arrows show faster speech, outward slower.
`?`	Question mark indicates rising intonation
→	Feature of interest to the analyst.
`((sobbing))`	Other details of the conversational scene.