Making a Difference

The social practice of practising English
Learning lessons from outside the language classroom

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The aim of this paper is to explore L2 learning in the Internet chat community of *Skypecasts*, and to reflect on the implications of Skypecast interactions for our understanding and conceptualisations of L2 learning and L2 competence in ways that may inform what teachers do in classrooms.

本論の目的は、Skypecastsというインターネットのチャット・コミュニティにおける第2言語 (L2) 学習を調査することである。また、L2学習およびL2能力について理解し、概念化するために、教師の教室内での実践との関連も含めて、Skypecasts内のインタラクションの意味を考察することである。

Within applied linguistics, the bulk of extant descriptions and conceptualisations of L2 learning are based on observations of behaviour occurring within the institutionalised setting of foreign/second language classrooms. Thus, notwithstanding competing paradigms, methods, and theoretical frameworks, much of what we know with regard to L2 learning is inextricably linked to teachers and students in instructional environments pursuing the overarching institutional goal of developing students' L2 competence (see Miller & Zuengler, 2012). So, for example, teachers organise learning activities and students purposively engage in them, while roles such as teachers and learners are instantiated through talk and other activities.

Contrasted with this is the relative paucity of research on L2 learning occurring outside foreign and second language classrooms—where L2s are used as part and parcel of the everyday-life world (Masuda, 2012). Such settings might include the workplace, the home, service encounters, the media, and the Internet.

The aim of this paper is to explore L2 learning in the Internet chat community of 'Skypecasts,' and to reflect on the implications of Skypecast interactions for our understanding and conceptualisations of L2 learning and L2 competence in ways that may inform what teachers do in classrooms. My study is based on approximately 12 hours of Skypecast recordings.

When they were closed by Skype in 2010, Skypecasts had become a popular venue for L2 users/learners who wished to practise their L2 online by chatting, through the spoken medium, with other Skypecast users around the world. Skypecast users could log on to *chatrooms* they themselves had created. These chatrooms covered a plethora of topics, from politics to football, from rock music to cars, from religion to practising English/French, as well as other foreign or second languages. Since Skypecast was closed, a number of other online voice- and video-chatting sites have emerged, so the medium and setting I am examining is live and relevant today.

As with L2 classrooms, Skypecast users engage in various forms of talk (chatting, debating, discussing), but unlike the majority of L2 classrooms, Skypecasts can also be the site of elaborate forms of ludic and even anarchic verbal behaviour, as some participants enter the Skypecasts with the intention of undermining the putatively scholarly forum of the Skypecasts. In Skypecasts there are no leaders or teachers establishing or organising the rules of social engagement, which includes L2 learning and language use. My analyses will examine whether and, where appropriate, how, in the absence of a teacher, Skypecast users orient to language learner status, how they deal with varying proficiency levels, different cultural backgrounds, and how (if at all), they go about establishing the 'rules' of L2 learning. I show that although language learning is a ubiquitous phenomenon, it is enveloped in contextual configurations and exigencies, which

are not predetermined, but co-constructed by the interactants in-situ.

My conceptualisation of language learning is therefore embedded in the local, micro-interactional details of talk. In this paper I view language learning in two ways: first, as a member's notion, that is, as something the participants talk about, discuss, thematize, draw attention to, and show awareness of, in more or less explicit ways, as interaction is underway. Second, as a locally achieved, ubiquitous element of social and communicative competence underpinning meaningful, orderly, intersubjective practices. In order for meaningful communication to occur, learning must, of necessity, be operationalised within micro-moments of talk and social interaction (see Kasper, 2009). Thus, topical coherence, orderly turn-taking, the design, and formatting of talk, inter alios, are dependent on learning.

By deploying Conversation Analytic methodology, I uncover and explicate the social practices through which Skypecast users practise English. I ask, how is practising English brought about within the cyber-environment of Skypecasts? My findings reveal a variety of participant orientations, including those that closely resemble more conventional conversation activities characteristic of L2 classrooms. I show how participants negotiate the content, tenor and 'rules of engagement' within Skypecasts. Skypecasts are frequently the site of contest: contest over how English practice is optimally undertaken, over what is allowable in English practice, over language choice, over the conversational floor, and over topic content, and duration. Not surprisingly, we find that some forms of interaction occurring in Skypecasts are intricately connected to the medium itself, which impacts upon how 'presentation of self' is accomplished, how 'lurking' is dealt with by the interactants, how leave-taking is managed, and more.

I argue that, because the communicative norms, expectations, number of participants, proficiency levels, and cultural backgrounds of newly arriving participants are subject to change on a moment-by-moment basis, Skypecasts are profoundly dynamic "communities of practice," where skilled and experienced participants demonstrate their Skypecast competence and adeptly socialise novice participants into the Skypecast

community. I argue that findings permit a reconceptualisation of established notions of L2 competence and L2 learning.

In terms of JALT and the interests of language teachers more widely, I also focus on the question of how analyses of Skypecast behaviours can be utilised in the L2 classroom. It is my contention—argued in papers such as Firth and Wagner (1997, 1998, and 2007)—that for too long, applied linguists and teacher education have been overly and exclusively preoccupied with the language classroom, with the result that our understandings of competence are inevitably limited and shaped by the institutional environment where teachers, lesson plans, pedagogy, etc., are primary. What happens outside classrooms remains, mystifyingly, *terra incognito* for most language teachers and applied linguists.

Learning in and through language is almost undoubtedly a ubiquitous social activity. If Firth and Wagner (1998) are correct in arguing that communicative competence is a fundamentally transitional, situational, and dynamic process, then any language users will always be 'learners' (or 'acquirers'), regardless of the social setting, because "[n]ew or partly-known registers, styles, language-related tasks, lexical items, terminologies and structures routinely confront language users, calling for contingent adaptation and transformation of existing knowledge and competence, and the acquisition of new knowledge" (Firth & Wagner, 1998). Nevertheless, notwithstanding the small but growing number of studies of L2 outside the classroom, we know very little about what happens in the complex interplay between L2 use, L2 learning, and L2 competence in naturally-occurring interactions outside the classroom. As several recent studies have shown, language use and language learning are not only conceptually inseparable; they are also context sensitive and context dependent (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Candlin & Sarangi, 2002; Leung, 2005; Canagarajah, 2007; Firth & Wagner, 2007; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007). Learning of any kind is rooted in and shaped by particularized social practices. This is the core insight of Lave and Wenger's (1991) influential notion of *situated learning* and underpins Vygotsky's (1978) theories of learning. Classrooms and experimental settings where 'L2 learners' perform tasks and interact with teachers and fellow students are communities of practice, with their own

(pre-ordained and emergent) rules of engagement, impacting social relations, the identity work that gets done in classrooms (Duff & Uchida, 1997), and not least the structures of talk (some of which have been described in Markee, 2000, 2004) and other semiotic resources, and, presumably, the processes and products of learning.

What, then, of L2 learning in naturalistic encounters outside the classroom? How might L2 learning be conceived and said to occur beyond the classroom/educational setting? How, if at all, is learning oriented to—by the participants in their dealings with one another, when the setting is *not* educational and L2 instruction is *not* the order of the day? How is L2 competence managed and developed outside the classroom setting? And how might research into L2 use and learning in non-instructional settings such as Skypecasts contribute to and possibly expand our general stock of knowledge of L2 learning and L2 acquisition? These are the questions I will seek to address in this paper.

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