Interactions in L2: Some Features of Japanese Learner Talk

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The central use of language in all human societies is spoken interaction, and interactional competence is a tacit goal of language learning. Interaction is not just the utterance of correctly constructed sentences. Rather, learners must be aware of ways in which the target language is used pragmatically by native and proficient speakers to allocate turns, achieve intersubjectivity, co-construct understanding, sustain progressivity, and signal their attitudes and understanding of both their own talk and that of their interlocutor. This paper outlines some common interactional practices of Japanese learners of English, derived from extensive video data of student peer talk, collected over several years in Japanese universities. I highlight such areas as turn-taking, use of discourse markers, backchanneling, and L1 usage. I suggest that awareness of these issues can help both students and their teachers orient to an interactional view of language with concomitant consequences for teaching and learning.

全ての人間社会において言語の主な使用方法は会話であり、その会話に必要な相互行為能力の習得は言語学習においても必要不可欠なものである。相互行為は正確な構文の産出のみで完遂できるものではなく、学習者は発話ターン構造や間主観性・相互認識の構築、会話の継続・維持、参与者の心的状態の表出など、L2母語話者や熟練話者による語用方略を正確に認識し適切に遂行しなければならない。本稿では、多様な会話データから、日本人英語学習者の典型的なL2相互行為の特性を概説する。日本の大学で数年をかけ長期的に収集された日本人英語学習者のピア会話のビデオデータを用いて、学習者による会話中のターン構築、談話標識の運用、相槌やL1使用の方略に焦点を当てた分析を行う。本研究は、英語教師だけではなく、ひいてはその学習者にも言語を相互行為として捉える観点を与え、英語学習活動に相互行為能力の習得を導入する契機になることを目指す。

In formal second or foreign language learning there is a four-way division of language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Within each of these skills there are a number of different genres, and proficiency in any single genre will not necessarily translate into proficiency in another: A student who has learned how to write academic papers cannot necessarily write prose fiction or poetry in the target language. This assumption seems commonsensical. Similarly, students who have practiced speaking genres such as speeches, presentations, or oral proficiency interviews will not necessarily be able to transfer their skills over to the genre of conversation. But this disjuncture between genres in speaking appears to be much less salient than that in writing styles. There seems to be an assumption among some teachers and institutions that speaking classes of any genre will have a beneficial effect on general speaking abilities. This belief that communicative competence will emerge as a natural outcome of formal language instruction was noted and criticized by Widdowson (1978).

As conversation is the central use of language in all cultures or "the primary, fundamental embodiment of sociality" (Schegloff, 2006, p. 70), its importance to language learning cannot be overstated. In this paper, I focus on the nature of conversation as a rule-bound and genre-specific form of speaking (see Campbell-Larsen & Cunningham, 2009) and assert that an understanding of the genre can inform classroom content and help develop learners' interactional competence (IC). In order to foreground the interactive practices of Japanese learners of English, I describe a broad range of recurrent features that were observable in extensive video data of peer interactions. These features are not epiphenomena and have a bearing on the IC of learners, but they may be overlooked by teachers who attend to matters of grammaticality and the like in student speaking.

Interactional Competence

In a seminal paper, Canale and Swain (1980) proposed three key competencies that are necessary in order to carry out communication in the target language: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Canale (1983) later added discourse competence. A further competence has been proposed: interactional competence. Hall and Pekarek Doehler (2011) provided a multifaceted description of IC and stated that, in part, it includes

> the ability to deploy and recognize context-specific patterns by which turns are taken, actions are organized and practices are ordered. And it includes the prosodic, linguistic, sequential and nonverbal resources conventionally used for producing and interpreting turns and actions, to construct them so that they are recognizable to others and to repair problems in maintaining shared understanding of the interactional work we and our interlocutors are accomplishing together. (p. 2)

In the context of Japanese learners of English, there is a long history of investigation into the speaking style of learners (e.g., Cutrone, 2009; Ellis, 1991). Ellis rightly cautioned against crude stereotypes and generalizations, but this should not preclude language teachers from identifying commonalities in the language use of learners, as recurrent phenomena may indicate areas that need special attention. In the area of interactional language, there may be real problems identifying areas of recurrent difficulty. These problems may partly be because of lack of awareness on the part of institutions and some teachers as to the precise nature of interactional language. This accords with Ellis's view that "many of the underlying rules of speaking lie beneath the threshold of consciousness" (p. 133). Terms from conversation analysis literature such as *open class repair initiator, dispreferred second pair part*, or *change of state token* are, in my experience, not widely used or understood among the general community of English language teachers, even though they are fundamental to understanding aspects of spoken interaction.

Furthermore, the focus on interactional aspects of language use may attract charges of native-speakerism, in which teaching students to speak *in* English and teaching speakers to speak *like* an English speaker are not differentiated. Discussion of this point is beyond the scope of this paper, but I believe that learners should have at least an awareness of the interactional resources that are available to speakers of English to facilitate interaction, whether or not they want to utilize these resources in their speaking.

The Nature of Japanese Learner Interactions

The extensive literature on Japanese learners of English frequently mentions large-scale and general phenomena such as reticence in speaking, shyness, and use of silence. Ellis (1991) portrayed Japanese speakers as generally orienting to a formal, indirect, inexplicit, and status-relevant style of speaking, deploying silence and backchanneling as interactional resources in ways that are at variance with norms of interaction in English. Other studies have focused on individual points, such as lower self-disclosure in casual talk with nonintimates (Iwata, 2010) or orientation to a nonexpert identity as an English user (Hauser, 2018). However, mundane conversation is suffused with a range of other, smaller-scale interactional phenomena that are used to manage interactions on a local basis, and these phenomena have been underrepresented in the literature. These micropractices are the focus of the following sections.

Focus of This Paper

To give a more fine-grained account of the speaking of Japanese English learners, the following sections describe a spectrum of recurrent interactive practices of such learners of English. The data is derived from video recordings of Japanese university students engaged in free conversation in English with classmates during a regular period of class time set aside for that purpose. Students were instructed to conduct conversations with their classmates. There was no mandated task, no handouts, textbooks, or other materials. The students self-selected partners and initiated talk, and the teacher moved around the class videotaping sections of ongoing interactions with a handheld video camera. The recordings were made over a period of 10 years at various universities in Japan, featuring students with a wide variety of English proficiency—from false beginner to high intermediate. The interactions were transcribed and analyzed by the author. Close analysis of these transcripts revealed several recurrent interactional practices that characterize a specifically Japanese type of English interaction (see Campbell-Larsen, 2013, 2016, 2018).

In describing these aspects of Japanese learner talk, it is important not to automatically categorize speakers as deficient and interactionally incompetent. Rather, the descriptions here serve to alert teachers to the kinds of student speaking practices that they may wish to address in class. Just as teachers should not insist on native-speaker norms as the only acceptable form of interaction, neither should they deprive learners of knowledge and understanding of those norms (some of which are not English-language specific). At the level of interaction, students should be given all the knowledge needed to make informed choices about their use of language.

Turn-Taking

The need for interactants to orient to smooth practices in turn-taking is a linguistic universal (Stivers et al., 2009). When speaker transition occurs, the ideal pattern is for "no gap, no overlap" (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974, p. 700), or a maximum of "one second of silence" (Jefferson, 1989, p. 170). Language learners often find it difficult to orient to these turn-taking practices. In some cases, silences between turns extend to several seconds. In other cases, the speaker orients to the need to take a turn in a timely fashion, but the turn onset is often marked with a nonlexical utterance, such as *ah* or *uhm,* often prolonged, or a Japanese L1 marker such as *etoh.* The turn is then subject to an extensive pause before any further content is forthcoming. This turn onset pattern is an occasional occurrence for most speakers but is a very noticeable feature of almost every turn in a small number of learners (Campbell-Larsen, 2018). The issue is not so much the occurrence, but the recurrence in multiple turns by the same speaker.

A further issue connected to turn-taking is turn allocation. Sacks et al. (1974) proposed that a current speaker may nominate the next speaker. Conversely, when the current speaker reaches a point of possible completion, a next speaker may self-nominate to take a turn. Finally, if a current speaker reaches a point of completion and no other self-selects to speak, then the current speaker may self-select to take a further turn. The next speaker can be nominated by a combination of intonational, pragmatic, or gestural cues, as well as by use of address terms and direct questioning. In my data, the occurrence of the other nomination formula *How about you?* is very frequent (26 instances in 100 minutes of student talk) and seems to be heavily relied on by many participants as a method to initiate speaker transition. The use of this formula is most often used to index a question that was asked at the beginning of the current sequence (Greer & Potter, 2008). Its pragmatic effect, however, is to prevent the addressee from developing the talk through reference to, or assessment of, the previous speaker's turn, thus curtailing progressivity and orienting to a question-and-answer structure that is more akin to an interview than a conversation (Campbell-Larsen, 2019).

In conversations featuring more than two participants, there is often an orientation to speaking in rounds. In these cases, speakers take turns according to a fixed order, with A followed by B, followed by C, followed by A, and so on. This is an abnormal turn-taking practice in mundane conversation, as noted by Cook (1989), who stated that a defining feature of conversation is that turns are not allocated in advance.

Minimized Turns

Another widespread and recurrent phenomenon in the data is a sequence of turns in which speakers proceed in a minimalized fashion (Campbell-Larsen, 2019). A speaker asks a stand-alone question, that is, one that is not supported by any commentary, clarification, exemplification of expected answers, or the like. The answer to this question is given in similarly minimal terms, oftentimes with a single word or phrase. Then the participant who asked the original question proceeds to ask another question, which may or may not be prompted by the content of the answer just given. This second question is often asked in similarly minimal fashion. The whole process then repeats, as in the following transcript:

Excerpt 1

Rei:	What are you doing in Golden week?
Aya:	**I go to Aqua Resort.**
Rei:	Aqua?
Chie:	Aqua resort?
Aya:	Aqua resort.
Rei:	**Ah, sounds good. How about you?**
Chie:	Uhm...I...maybe I didn't I work every day.

This kind of interaction is not typical of the genre of conversation in either English or Japanese, and I speculate that students may have become habituated to this kind of structure through classroom speaking in response to teacher questions, which are basically display questions (Long & Sato, 1983). Another possible reason is that students have become accustomed through text and teacher prompts to asking so-called follow-up questions. However, not all answers to questions in mundane conversation are followed by a follow-up question. Repeated follow-up questions may not be interpreted as showing interest and engagement but rather be seen as a signal that the answer given was somehow incomplete or insufficient. Whatever the case, the pragmatic effects of giving stock, anodyne, and minimal answers to a sequence of questions that are designed to be interactive rather than transactive should be made clear to students. For example, the teacher might instruct a student to ask an interactive question and then respond in minimal fashion. Two or three iterations of the minimized sequence should demonstrate the burdens placed on an interaction by this practice.

L1 Usage

The use of the student's L1 during L2 interactions is a complex and nuanced area. What constitutes an L1 utterance is not a clear-cut issue. A multiturn sequence in the L1, completely abandoning the L2, lies at one end of a spectrum. The other end of the spectrum consists of such categorically vague items as L2 proper nouns uttered with L1 pronunciation or loan words from either language. A further aspect of L1 usage is participant identity. There will be greater shared understanding of interactional practices in interactions between Japanese L1 speakers than in interactions between a Japanese L1 and a non-Japanese speaker who is unfamiliar with those practices. In the Japanese EFL classroom, both Japanese and non-Japanese teachers may become habituated to certain practices of L1 usage by students and not see the need to raise students' awareness that their practices are neither universal nor accessible to those without such insider knowledge of the L1 speech and interaction culture.

One such recurrent practice of learners at all proficiency levels is the interweaving of L1 discourse markers (DM) into their L2 utterances. Common Japanese DM such as *etoh* or *ano ne* appear to varying degrees in almost all student speaking:

Excerpt 2

Mari: Yes but I don't know Sannomiya area. I don't know.
Kana: Eh
Mari: This spring *kara* ***etoh***, I go home
Kana: Oh~ Eh?
Mari: ***Etoh***, home my, my ***etoh***, I was, was born in Kobe,
but, ***etoh, etoh*** *sugu* er... Go to Shizuoka.
Kana: Shizuoka
Mari: *Mashi* Elementary school, Junior High school, High school, Shizuoka's school
Went to Shizuoka's school, *deh*, I came to **etoh,** University in Osaka. Last year,
etoh, ((University name)) first year, **etoh,** one people...
Kana: Oh...
Mari: But my family **etoh** came to Shizuoka to...

Even though this might seem like a minor point, DM are not unimportant. Hasselgreen (2004) found that DM are key fluency indicators for L2 speakers and that they are not purposeless fillers but have vital functions in managing interaction (see Heritage, 2015; Schegloff & Lerner, 2009; and Schiffrin, 1987, for a detailed account of some DM functions). The importance of DM and the pragmatic effects of using DM from a different language can be demonstrated by the teacher. Responding to an interactive question asked in Japanese, the teacher might provide an answer whose propositional content is in Japanese but is fully marked with English DM, such as *well, you know,* or *I mean.* Students universally agree that the utterance is problematical. Similarly, proceeding with an interaction in either English or Japanese and then inserting DMs from a third language that the student does not know (such as the German *doch* or *naturlich*) causes noticeable perturbations to the progress of the interaction. Students are often unaware of their own use of L1 DM, and when they are shown video data of their interactions, they are often surprised to notice both the occurrence and extent of the practice and almost universally orient to minimizing their use in future talk.

A related interactional practice that is often carried out in L1 is the use of listener response tokens, known in Japanese as *aizuchi* and in English as *backchannels*. As with DM, *aizuchi* carry out vital interactive functions (Locastro, 1987). Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki, and Tao (1996) found that in Japanese L1 interactions, Japanese use *aizuchi* differently in both placement and frequency to the backchannels used by native or proficient English speakers in English interactions. Once again, teachers may be habituated to this kind of student action, and students may be unaware that they are *doing being a listener* in Japanese rather than the language of the ongoing interaction. The importance of response tokens can be demonstrated by instructing dyads to engage in interaction (in either L1 or L2) but forbidding one interactant from doing any receipting of the other's turns. The conversations quickly flounder. Similarly, the pragmatic effects of using L1 receipt tokens in L2 speaking can be demonstrated by the teacher receipting student turns (L1 or L2) with responses from an L3 (e.g., the German *ach so, prima,* etc.). Such responses have an immediate perturbing effect on progressivity as recipients of these backchannels try to work out what is happening.

Use of *aizuchi* in place of L2 backchannels also has the effect that the receipt tokens minimalistically signal receipt of the utterance. That is, users of these response tokens may claim understanding but do not demonstrate it, and this may have pragmatic import as the interaction unfolds. (For a discussion on claiming versus demonstrating understanding, see Mondada, 2011).

L2 Discourse Markers

DM play a vital role in interaction, but their importance in talk is often overlooked or even stigmatized (Campbell-Larsen, 2017a; Watts, 1989). In my data, one of the noticeable things is the almost complete lack of common L2 discourse markers in student talk. Transcriptions of student interactions almost always have zero or very sparse instances of *well*, *you know*, *I mean,* and other common English DM (Campbell-Larsen, 2013), even though these items are among the most frequently occurring words and chunks in spoken English (McCarthy, 2010). Teachers can demonstrate the effects of using as opposed to not using DM by modeling three types of answers. The teacher might direct the student to ask a question (e.g., *What did you do last weekend?*) in the student's L1. The teacher first responds to the question (in the same language) with a minimal response (e.g., *I ate out.*). The question is asked again, and the teacher presents an extended answer, but without any DM. A third iteration of the question is then asked, and this time, the answer is given with appropriate L1 DM. When asked, students almost unanimously agree that the marked version was the most natural and most likely to promote further talk. The process is repeated in the L2 to demonstrate how and where marking is done in the target language. By these means, the importance and centrality of DM can be conveyed to learners.

Other Points

Two other recurrent interactional practices are observable in my data. First, assessments are often agreed with by repetition rather than upgrade. Repetition as agreement is common in Japanese interactions but is less common in English. Interactionally, it claims rather than demonstrates understanding (Campbell-Larsen, 2016).

Second, repairs are often carried out with a limited menu of open class repair initiators (e.g., *Eh?*, *What?*, *Pardon?*, silence, multiple restarts, or reversion to L1; Campbell-Larsen, 2017b). Repair initiations that more closely identify the nature and location of the trouble source such as partial repeats (either with or without interrogatives) are not a common occurrence in learner talk, despite their efficiency in trouble-source resolution.

Conclusion

It is hard to imagine a situation in which a language learner did not orient at some level to wanting to speak the language, that is, to interact in the language. The processes underlying interaction are generally not metacognitively accessible to native speakers of any language, but to ignore those processes brings the risk of sending unintended signals and consequent pragmatic failure. It is the mutually understood and recognized nature of those processes and practices that renders them effective for ordering interactions. The identification of some commonalities, tendencies, and features of the interactional style of Japanese learners of English can help teachers and learners orient to an interactive view of language and develop interactional practices that are recognizable to their interlocutor(s). These practices will apply whether those interlocutors are fellow L1 speakers, native speakers of the L2, or speakers of another language in a *lingua franca* context. In institutionally mandated questionnaires, my students consistently comment on the points raised in this paper and overwhelmingly take a positive view of the focus on developing IC in class.

Any close analysis of naturally occurring talk will reveal multiple instances of grammar infelicities, misspeaking, and the like. This observation suggests that conversations can proceed without strict adherence to standards of grammar and vocabulary that are appropriate to the written form of the language. However, conversations across the language boundary may miscarry when the interactional practices are not mutually accessible and pragmatic perturbations come to dominate. Mutually recognizable interactive practices are a vital first step to promote inclusivity and mutuality.

Bio Data

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