

Student Orientation to Grammatical Aspects of Interaction in Group Work

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Abstract

Using the framework of Conversation Analysis, this paper examines the interaction found in task-based group work, and explores the effects of interaction on second language acquisition. For this study 26 hours of conversation by 23 small groups of Japanese university students were audio taped. A close analysis of the students' interaction in the group discussion revealed the students' competence in managing grammatical problems through self-repair and peer-assistance. The data show some of the benefits of group work in language learning classrooms.

Introduction

The basic concept behind Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is that languages can be learned through the use of language as opposed to explicit teaching of language structure. It has been suggested in the language teaching literature that the best way to create a communicative context is through the application of language learning tasks. In task-based language learning learners can actually use the language in discussing various topics and problems while working in small groups. Unfortunately, research into what actually occurs during these discussion tasks is sparse in the second language acquisition literature. In this study, we demonstrate how the techniques

of Conversation Analysis are applied to the close examination of the interaction occurring in group work, and how that interaction leads to the acquisition of a language.

Many researchers in second language acquisition maintain that input alone is not sufficient for intake to destabilize the interlanguage and lead to learning of new linguistic forms. Long (1980) argues in the Interaction Hypothesis that language learning is a result of negotiation of meaning within communicative contexts. In addition, Swain (1985) claims that learners must have conditions that allow for language production if language learning is to occur. On the other hand, Ellis (2003), warns us that “the co-construction of the social reality of tasks” by learners must not be ignored in the analysis of task variables and their outcomes (p. 100).

Most students in Japanese universities have had years of explicit grammar teaching, memorization of vocabulary lists, and maybe some listening and reading exercises in their six years of English study in junior and senior high school. This means that what the students require upon entering university is the chance to participate in communicative language tasks, that is opportunities for negotiation of meaning and pushed output. Group work discussions that let learners participate in realistic communication provide ample opportunities for negotiation of meaning and pushed output. However, how group work discussion tasks provide opportunities for realistic communication has yet to be analyzed within the language-learning classroom. Consequently, in this paper we apply techniques from Conversation Analysis to the language co-produced by the learners in discussion groups in order to understand how that language is socially co-constructed and what the possible effects of that co-construction are on language learning.

Conversation Analysis and Nonnative Interaction

The development of Conversation Analysis (CA) began with the

collaboration of Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson working together in the field of Sociology. In CA, through repeated examination of tape-recordings and transcripts of authentic spoken interaction, practitioners focus on revealing participants' displayed orientation to making sense of interactions, an orientation that is revealed in the detail of their talk and other conduct.

Although CA originated from analyses of conversation between/among native speakers of English, in the past 10 years, attempts have been made to analyze naturally occurring interactions involving nonnative speakers (e.g., Firth, 1996; Gardner & Wagner, 2004; Hauser, 2003; Hosoda, 2000; 2002; Kasper, in press; Koshik, 1999; 2002; Markee, 2000; Mori, 2002; Wagner & Firth, 1997; Wong, 2000a; 2000b). Using tape/video-recorded data and their transcripts, these conversation analytic studies on NNS conversation attempted to uncover distinct features of NNS interaction, the sequential aspects of NNSs' interaction, and NNSs' orientation to language learning in and out of the language classroom. These studies have demonstrated the potential of applying the CA approach to studies on second language learning. One of the central tenets of CA is that the researcher should not come to the analysis process with preconceived notions about what they are going to find. Therefore, we do not have any specific research question concerning counts of categorized linguistic aspects, but are looking closely at the transcripts and listening closely to the tapes in order to allow the data to reveal to us what it holds.

Method¹

Participants

Participants in this study were 85 Japanese university students from two universities in Tokyo. All students were majoring in Law and were enrolled in freshman English courses. All 32 female and 53 male participants were randomized into groups. Most of the groups contained four members. The participants were not informed

beforehand about the focus of the research. The group discussions were recorded during the regular class time, and all procedures followed the normal class structure.

Materials

The two tasks used in this study were similar to discussion tasks these students had participated in throughout the academic year. Both tasks are ranking tasks in which the students were asked to select the best of five candidates for a heart transplant or for an elementary school teaching position, and then to rank the remaining candidates. Task 1, from the textbook, *The Non-stop Discussion Workbook* (1988), was "Who Gets The Heart?" Task 2, from the textbook, *Can't Stop Talking* (1990), was "Who Will Be The Best Teacher?"

Procedures

Each group was recorded with a small cassette-recorder. At first, the discussion task was transcribed broadly. Then closer transcriptions were produced with the Jefferson transcription conventions normally used in Conversation Analysis (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984).

Results and Discussion

While interacting in the tasks, the students demonstrated their competence in repairing grammatical problems by themselves.

Self-Repair of Grammatical Forms

The learners in this data set recurrently repaired grammatical mistakes in their own utterances before their turns were completed. Consider example (1) below.

(1) [W1, G1, T1, p. 1]

1. Y: I think that she wants to receive the heart because she
2. → is the most- the most, the oldest person in the heart patient,

3. 57, so...
4. T: You think should receive?
5. Y: Should receive.

In example (1), Y is arguing why one of the patients, Martha, should receive the heart. In line 2, Y self-repairs her utterance. First, she produces “the most” and cuts off at the end of the word and she then produces “the most” again. Next, she goes back to “the” again, and this time it is followed by the correct superlative form of “old.” This shows that although Y made some linguistic errors at the beginning, she has knowledge of the grammatical point and she is competent enough to self-repair the grammatical mistake she has made. This also shows her orientation to speaking grammatically correct utterances while speaking in group work.

A similar phenomenon can be seen in example (2).

(2) [W2, G6, T2, p. 1]

1. D: This school, for this school, because she is very young,
2. → age 24. He is, and she is, she has, she has experience,
3. teaching experience. So she said she loves children. I
4. think for elementary school very, for elementary school,
5. children must be loved.
6. T: ok.

In example (2), D is giving a reason why she thinks one of the candidates for an elementary school teaching position is an appropriate candidate. In line 2, she makes four tries in uttering “she has experience,” and each try she makes shows progress toward the grammatically appropriate form. In the first try, she begins her sentence with “He is.” However, as the candidate she is arguing for is a female, she goes back to the beginning of her sentence after “and” and changes the person pronoun and utters “she is.” She then goes back to the beginning again and changes the be-verb to “has” and produces “she

has.” After she goes back to the beginning of her sentence for the fourth time, she can finally produce the grammatically complete sentence “she has experience.” As Y in example (1), D in this example shows her competence of self-managing grammatical problems.

In example (3), a student repairs the third person singular form of a verb and the plural form of a noun.

(3) [S, G7, T1, p. 3]

1. Y: You said Sammy didn't Sammy doesn't have a child (1.0)
2. He will, uhm uh::: he have the shining (.) future? hhuh
3. hhuh hhuh I thin(h)k so too but, (1.2) Sammy (0.8) Sammy
4. doesn't doesn't have? (1.3) he- he doesn't (.) have his
5. → child but Leon have child. (0.6) Leon has child, (0.4)
6. → children. three children. and they are young. (.) If he
7. died, they can't live.
8. T: °Oh,°
9. Y: °with themselves.°

In example (3), Y is explaining the reason that one of the candidates, Leon, should receive the heart. In lines 4 to 6, in conveying Leon has three children, Y makes three tries. First, Y says “Leon have child” and she changes “have” to the third person singular form “has.” Next, she changes “child” to the plural form “children.” Notice that “has” and “children” have emphatic stress. Then she inserts “three” and utters “three children.” However, in repairing her utterance, Y is not just attending to the form of her utterance. Her repair also performs an important function in the interaction. By inserting “three,” Y is making her argument stronger: Leon has children and the number of children is not one or two but three, and if Leon dies three children will be left by themselves. Thus, in this example, Y demonstrates not only her competence in making repairs on grammatical forms, but also competence in making repair to strengthen her argument in the discussion. In other words, she orients to both meaning and form in her

utterance.

Other-Repair of Grammatical Forms

However, students sometimes needed others' help in producing grammatically appropriate utterances. In Example (4), the other speaker comes in to provide help.

(4) [W1, G1, T1, p. 2]

1. O: I chose Martha Rosales too, because she: has four
2. children, (0.5) and (1.4) if she (1.0) she (1.8) she is
3. not- (2.0) she is
4. (1.0)
5. →Y: if she dies?
6. O: uh, yes. (1.0) her children is: u:n is very,
7. Y: very sad,
8. O: yes.

In line 2, O begins a clause with "if she" but O repeats "she" three times, continues with "is not" and cuts off, and repeats "she is." After a one second pause, in line 5, Y comes in to provide assistance via co-construction: Y produces "if she dies?" and O accepts the repair and continues her utterance in line 6.

In the example below, the other student provides a part of the searched-for item.

(5) [S, G4, T2, p. 5]

1. S: Because (1.2) he: will be eh? he will (1.0)
2. he'[ll be
3. H: [physical? =
4. S: = physical punishment. =
5. H: = punishment.
6. S: He will have?
7. K: do.

8. H : do =
9. S : = do, he will
10. (0.5)
11. H : because,

In example (5), S is giving a reason why one of the candidates for a teaching position is not appropriate for the position. S begins her utterance with "Because," which that shows that she is stating a reason, and pauses for a while. Next, she begins again with "he will" but utters "eh?" which shows that she is facing some problem. She then repeats "he will" and pauses for a while again. As soon as she once again starts producing "he will," H, who had been observing S's problem in speaking, provides the word "physical" in line 3. In line 4, S adds "punishment" and completes the phrase "physical punishment." In line 6, S faces another problem: she produces "he will have?" with rising intonation, which is followed by another other-repair by K. K repairs S's utterance and produces "do," which is accepted by S and H in lines 8 and 9. S then goes back to the main sequence of the interaction.

In some cases, repair by others turns out to be inappropriate.

(6) [S, G8, T2, p. 3]

1. H : He doesn't have an aptitude for,
2. →K : fitness.
3. →H : fitness?
4. S : elementary school teacher.
5. →H : aptitude. (.) aptitude for elementary school.

In example (6), H starts arguing the reason why one of the candidates is not appropriate for the teaching position. As H stops his utterance after "an aptitude for" with continuing intonation, K produces a word, "fitness." In the next turn, H takes K's production of the word "fitness" as an attempt to correct the word "aptitude" H produced in turn 1: H

initiates repair by repeating the word “fitness” with rising intonation. As other-initiation of repair often implicates some disagreement (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977), this repair initiation shows H’s disagreement with the word K offered. In line 5, H reproduces the word “aptitude” again with falling intonation, and after a brief pause, once again he produces “aptitude” and continues his utterance he started producing in line 1. Thus, H did not uptake the incorrect word choice that was offered by his peer.

In short, even when the students were not able to manage the problems of speaking by themselves, they were able to manage the problems with help from the other students, not from the teacher. The students demonstrated their orientation to jointly constructing grammatically appropriate utterances in the course of the discussion task.

Other-Initiation to Ask for Repetition

Occasionally, a student was asked to repeat his/her statement again by the other students, and the repeated statements resulted in the other students’ understanding. Consider example (7).

(7) [S, G5, T1, p. 1]

1. →N: You said (.) she didn’t she doesn’t °if° she needs the heart.
2. but (1.4) you give the heart (0.5) °to her?°
3. (1.0)
4. ? : °What (.) could be the reason.°
5. N: What could be the reason.
6. (2.0)
7. →A: a: once more please.
8. N: You said Amanda doesn’t need the heart. but if, (.) uh: you
9. give give her the heart, (.) uh: what what could be the
10. reason.?
11. A: uh:: (.) uh: e:: She will uh:: she will write uh:: more::
12. better poem. for:: (0.5) for:: un people. uh:: (1.0)

13. everyone will love the poem. so::: she should (1.0) uh::
 14. she should receive the heart.

In example (7), in lines 1 and 2, N starts asking A a question. This question is in response to a statement by A in the prior turns, and “you” in this question refers to A. Thus this question is addressed to A. However, N has some problems formulating this question. Her utterance contains a lot of pauses and the volume of her voice becomes very small toward the end of her utterance although she marks her statement as a question by rising intonation at the end of her statement. However, this question fails to get an answer from A. After a one second gap, somebody in the group besides A or N provides help with an example question and whispers “What (.) could be the reason” in line 4, and N repeats that question. This time, A shows understanding that he understood the question to some degree. He utters “a:” (oh) which shows that the state of his knowledge has changed (Heritage, 1984). However, his understanding was not enough to answer the question: he asks N to repeat the question. In lines 11 to 14, N repeats her question again and utters the question with less pausing and larger volume of voice. Furthermore, she incorporates the sentence she received from the other member of the group in line 4 into her question. This second try in asking the question results in A’s understanding, and in lines 11 to 14, A answers the question.

In example (7), when the other speaker asked for repetition, the speaker of the trouble source repeated her utterance with less pausing and self-repair, and her second try resulted in the other speaker’s understanding. However, the other student’s initiation of repair did not necessarily lead to the speaker’s speech without pauses and repairs, but nevertheless resulted in the other student’s understanding. Consider example (8) below.

(8) [W1, G5, T1, p. 2]

1. M: We decide to make Peter Jacobson to: fifth choice < but

2. if he:: he: will be living (.) the doctors ca:n (0.5)
3. can investigate (.) him. and: (.) and:: (0.7) family.
4. heart disease family.
5. T : un.
6. (0.8)
7. →T : Hmm? =
8. →M : = if- *warui*. If he may be (.) living, the doctors (.) ca:n
9. can research why its: is (.) heart disease family, what
10. there is there is:: heart disease family. and:: ca::n (0.5)
11. get get well.
12. T : *hun hun hun hun*.

In lines 1 to 4, M argues against everybody else's decision of making Peter Jacobson the last choice to receive the heart. Although she states her point with a lot of pauses and sound stretches, she manages to complete her turn and she marks the end of her turn with falling intonation. However, T, one of the listeners of M's talk, does not take M's turn to be complete. As M completes her turn, T utters "un" which shows that T is attending to M's message and maintaining his listenership. As M does not continue her utterance, in line 7, T initiates repair "Hmm?" Then in line 8, M tries to repeat again. Notice that when M tries to repeat her argument, M utters "*warui* (sorry)." She apologizes to the listeners that she failed to make the audience understand her point. This shows her orientation to conveying comprehensible messages to the other students in the discussion task. In the second try in lines 8 to 11, although her utterance still contains a lot of pauses and sound stretches, she succeeds in making her statement more comprehensible for the audience: T shows his understanding by producing "*hun hun hun hun*" in line 12.

As shown in examples (7) and (8), when the students were asked for repetition of their utterances by the other students, they were able to make their utterances more comprehensible to the listeners.

Conclusion

This data set gives evidence that learners have competence in managing grammatical problems themselves without assistance from the teacher. In coping with grammatical difficulties, the students showed their orientation to grammatical aspects of interaction. Through their orientation to the grammatical forms of their utterances, they also displayed their orientation to being language learners. Moreover, while orienting to the grammatical forms of their utterances, the students also displayed their orientation to meaning. A major concern for teachers when they use group work in their classes is whether or not students produce grammatical errors that are incorporated into the interlanguage of the other students. Some studies provide evidence that L2 learners may incorporate errors produced by other learners (e.g., Plann, 1977; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). However, this data set demonstrates that the learners helped each other in producing comprehensible and more grammatical utterances. In addition, even when one student produces an incorrect form, the other student may refuse the incorrect form and produce the correct form. Rather, when erroneous forms are produced by some students, the students may create opportunities for language learning by re-orienting themselves to grammatically appropriate language forms (also in Ohta, 2000).

Notes

- 1 For further information on participants, materials, and procedures see Aline (1999).
- 2 In brackets next to the example numbers, information about the data source is given. For example, example (1) is from S university, group 2, and task 1, and it is on p. 7 of the original transcript.

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APPENDIX

Transcription Conventions

[]	overlapping talk
=	latched utterances
(0.0)	timed pause (in seconds)
(.)	a short pause
co:lon	extension of the sound or syllable
co::lon	a more prolonged stretch
.	fall in intonation (final)
,	continuing intonation (non-final)
?	rising intonation (final)
;	intonation between a period and a comma
¿	a rise stronger than comma but weaker than a question mark

CAPITAL	loud talk
<u>underline</u>	emphasis
◦ ◦	passage of talk that is quieter than surrounding talk
< >	passage of talk that is slower than surrounding talk
> <	passage of talk that is faster than surrounding talk
hh	audible aspirations
*hh	audible inhalations
(hh)	laughter within a word
(())	comment by the transcriber
()	problematic hearing that the transcriber is not certain about