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Learning to participate in a communicative activity:

A case of EFL students

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1. Introduction

Every language lesson presents a unique social, cultural context composed of a variety of speech events or activities (Cazden, 2001; Duff, 2002; Mohan, 1986; van Lier, 1988). As Ramírez (1995) puts it, "From a sociolinguistic perspective, each language lesson can be seen as consisting of a series of speech events (e.g., greetings, lecture, review, question-and-answer drills, and role-playing situations) with a specific set or range of language functions" (p. 3). In their lessons, teachers use various *interactional structures* or forms of interaction, including teacher-class interaction and peer interaction in small groups (Ramírez, 1995).

The use of small group work has been supported by a number of second language acquisition (SLA) researchers (see Koyanagi, 2004, for a review). For example, Long and Porter (1985) present pedagogical and psycholinguistic rationale for group work, arguing that task-based group work, especially that which requires two-way information exchange, provides learners with more practice, a greater variety of practice, and more opportunities to negotiate meaning. Underlying this view is students' communication in their target language. What is presupposed here is that students are ready to perform L2 communicative tasks. However, as many Japanese students of English have previously been taught in classrooms where the language of instruction is Japanese (LoCastro, 1996), they may not necessarily have the linguistic knowledge required to perform language production tasks (Korst, 1997). One thing that teachers can do to help learners benefit most from the environment that group work can create is to assist students in developing *classroom communicative competence* (Johnson, 1995) by offering training in classroom English. According to Golebiowska (1990), communicating about classroom routines of the English lessons is:

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> spontaneous;
> quite simple from the point of view of language it involves and fairly predictable—it can therefore be easily taught and learnt;
> easy to accept because it is indispensable and well known from lessons of other subjects (p. 1).

Despite this importance, studies to date have not paid much attention to EFL students learning to communicate about classroom routines in their target language. How do students learn to communicate about their classroom routines? What can teachers do to assist their students in this process? It was these questions that motivated the present study.

The intent of the present paper therefore is to report on an EFL teacher's attempt to help his students learn the classroom English associated with a particular activity, namely checking answers with their partners, during a three-month EFL course at a private language school in Japan. We will first review the relevant literature to establish the theoretical underpinnings upon which the present study depends. Secondly, we will describe the context and research methodology of the study. Thirdly, we will present some evidence of students learning based primarily on classroom discourse. This will be followed by a discussion of the edagogical implications.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

The present study draws upon Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of mind (Vygotsky, 1978). Like other L2 researchers (e.g., Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Ohta, 2001; van Lier, 1996), we assume that individual mental functioning including L2 proficiency emerges through the appropriation of social discourse. According to Vygotsky (1981),

> Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. (p. 163)

What this means is that all higher mental functions (e.g., thinking, logical memory, language) originate in and develop through social interactions with significant others (e.g., parents, siblings, teachers). Initially, children or newcomers to a community rely on more experienced members of that community in their participation in sociocultural activities. However, as they gain experience and knowledge, they assume greater responsibility for their own learning and participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2003). Vygotsky (1978) argues that by working together with adults or more competent

members of the community children can achieve something which they could not achieve by themselves.

In recent years, a number of L2 researchers have used this perspective to consider peer interactions where there are no experts. Their studies have shown that students can co-construct L2 knowledge by scaffolding one another's L2 production as well as by engaging in collaborative dialogues (e.g., Donato, 1994; Kobayashi, 2003; Ohta, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Donato's (1994) study illustrated how a small group of L2 learners were able to provide one another with scaffolds similar to those which experts provide for novices, as reported in developmental psychological studies. Along similar lines, the present study considers the nature of collaborative interactions among students as well as those between teacher and students.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Participants and Setting

The present study reports on an EFL instructor's attempt to promote student-student interaction in a three-month seminar on communicative grammar, offered at Victory, a private language school in Japan. This was a special course, originally designed for ESL students in the USA, and based on a needs analysis, the syllabus was revised especially for students at Victory. This alone made the seminar unique, because all other Victory courses were developed not by the teachers themselves, but by the central office. Each lesson was two hours. Six students were enrolled in the English seminar: Annie, Beth, Jean, Judy, Katy, and Nancy (all pseudonyms). The students greatly ranged in age and proficiency: one of them was in her thirties, three in their late twenties, and two in their teens. They were also taking regular conversation courses at Victory. Most students were taking basic courses and a few of them were taking intermediate courses.

Learner Training. One of the most important goals of the Communicative Grammar seminar was to encourage students to take responsibility for their own L2 learning. Hence learner training was an indispensable part of the seminar. For one thing, the instructor had a ten-minute debriefing session at the end of each lesson and discussed with students reasons for doing what they did for the day. Prior to discussion, students were required to write down on the reflection sheet what they learned from the lesson. These served as learner reports on uptake (Slimani, 1991). The purpose of this debriefing session was twofold: it was intended (1) to promote student reflection on classroom activities (Kohonen, 1992) and (2) for the instructor and students to be aware of each other's view points and hopefully to close the gap between teacher intention and

learner perception by making classroom activities more meaningful to students (Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Nunan, 1988).

Another training component has to do with classroom English. The instructor devised a sheet called “Check your answers with your partner” (henceforth, CAP, see Appendix) and gave it to all of the participants. There were a couple of reasons for this. First, most students commented in the questionnaire used for needs analysis that they would feel more comfortable speaking English in pairs or small groups than in a large group. The fact that students feel more anxious about speaking an L2 in large groups than small groups is nothing new in itself (see, for example, Arnold, 1999; Kagan, 1994; Long & Porter, 1985; Tsui, 1996). In fact, congruent with Tsui (1996), the instructor decided to give students the chance to check their answers with their classmates before having them respond to the entire class.

This immediately brought the instructor another question: How can students compare their answers in English? In the present case, students had not yet developed the linguistic knowledge or the means to check their answers with their peers in the target language. Using Japanese was allowed but not encouraged, mainly because students expected that they would study grammar in English. Finally, the instructor devised the CAP sheet in consultation with his colleagues--both native-speakers and non-native speakers of English. This sheet of some *prefabricated routines and patterns* (Krashen, 1981) was intended to help students communicate with each other. Students were encouraged to make the most of it by adding useful expressions in the margin of the sheet as they came across them in and outside of class.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected through audio-recorded classroom observations, lesson reflections, and semi-structured interviews. The first author observed lessons and took field notes quietly. However, she would participate in classroom activities when invited by the participants, thus playing a moderate role in the classroom (Spradley, 1980).

3.3 Data Analysis

Audio-recorded interactions were transcribed following the conventions presented by Duff (1995). They were then supplemented by the researcher’s field notes. The major unit of analysis was the activity of checking answers with partners. The researchers read through all the transcripts to trace student participation over time.

4. Findings

Modeling by the Instructor

Excerpt 1 comes from the first meeting. Here, the CAP sheet is being introduced to the class by the instructor. Thus, it can be viewed as primary socialization. Students have just finished an exercise.

Excerpt 1: Introducing the CAP Sheet

1 I: So everybody's ready, right?
2 Ss: Yes.
3 I: Good. Now I'd like you to work in pairs and check your answers. ((The instructor
4 distributes handouts.)) Did everyone get this sheet? It says "check your
5 answers with your partner" on top.
6 Ss: Yes.
7 I: OK. I'll show you how to use it. Katy, you are B and I'm A.
8 K: B? (0.6) Oh, OK.
9 I: And the rest of you, please listen. ((T starts to demonstrate)) So Katy, what did
10 you choose for #1?
11 K: Well - I chose a.
12 I: And you say?
13 K: U:mm. (1.2) Ah yes, how- how about you?
14 I: Me too.
15 K: Great?
16 I: Yes. Thank you, Katy. Good job. OK, this time, Annie, you are B and I'm A again.
17 A: So - uh I'm B?
18 I: That's right.
19 A: OK.
20 I: Annie, what did you get for #1?
21 A: Well, I choose - a.
22 I: So you chose a?
23 A: Yes.
24 I: And ask me.
25 A: Oh, OK. (1.1) What did you get for #1, Makoto?
26 I: Well, I have a different answer. I chose b.
27 A: Umm (2.1) Oh, really? Let's ask u:mm
28 I: Who would you like to ask?
29 A: Who?
30 I: Yes. - Pick one of your classmates.

31 A: Oh, I see. U:mm (1.3) maybe Judy.
32 I: Judy. All right. So you say, let's a:sk?
33 A: Let's ask Judy.
34 I: Yes, let's! Thank you, Annie.

As line 7 indicates, in this excerpt, the instructor asks Annie and Katy to work with him for the purpose of modeling the use of the CAP sheet. The first round with Katy (lines 9-16) goes rather smoothly. In contrast, the second round is more challenging in that the instructor and Annie have different answers. So the instructor provides a series of verbal scaffolds to help Annie accomplish the answer-checking task (lines 22, 24, 28, 30 and 32) and Annie completes her role in line 33.

Excerpt 2: Learning New Expressions in the Plenary Session

35 I: OK? Are you ready?
36 Ss: Yes.
37 I: OK, did you have any questions or problems? Maybe you have different answers?
38 Annie and Katy?
39 K: Uh, yes. (0.8) #2.
40 I: So you are not sure about #2? Look at the check-your-answers sheet, everyone. Here,
41 Katy and Annie, you can say, "We're not sure =
42 K: = Oh: OK. We're not sure about #2.
43 A: Yeah, we are not sure about #2.
44 I: Do you want to ask other people?
45 A: Yes.
46 I: Who would you like to ask?
47 A: ((asking Katy)) Judy?
48 K: Sure.
49 I: Judy. OK. Go ahead.
50 A: What =
51 I: = Oh, who are you asking?
52 A: Judy and Beth,
53 I: Uh-huh
54 A: What did you get for #2?
55 J: Well, we got b. How about you?
56 A: Oh, really? We have different answers.
57 K: Ye:s, I got c.
58 A: And I chose b.
59 K: Let's ask Jean.

In this excerpt, the instructor is introducing an expression of uncertainty, “I’m not sure about ...” As lines 40 and 41 indicate, this expression, along with some other useful expressions, is listed on the CAP sheet (see Appendix). This type of interaction was common practice in the seminar, for the instructor intended to introduce expressions as needed, thereby situating them in appropriate contexts. To borrow Kohonen’s (1992) words, students were “provided with experiences of language data through the meaningful use of the language in natural contexts” (p. 28). Another important point is that students are being encouraged to go beyond the boundary of pairs and to communicate with students in other pairs (lines 44 & 46). It was hoped that this would help to familiarize the students with speaking in a larger group and to promote collaboration between participants. At the end of this lesson, the students were asked to think about possible reasons why the CAP sheet was introduced. Most of them figured that it was intended to reduce their anxiety. Interestingly, some of them mentioned in their lesson reflection sheets that it might be designed to strengthen group solidarity.

Peer Interaction

The following week, Nancy, who missed the first meeting, came to class. Naturally, she seemed to have no idea what was happening when the other students started to check their answers in pairs. The instructor asked her to work with Katy, who actively helped her classmates at the first meeting.

Excerpt 3: Peer Interaction

60 I: OK, time’s up. Please check your answers. Let’s see (1.2) how many people do we have
61 today. (3.0) Six. Good. Even number. (2.3) So work in pairs just like you did last week.
62 Ss: ((Some students look a little confused while others have their CAP sheets on their
63 tables.))
64 I: (8.0) Do you all have the check-your-answer sheet?
65 K: [Yeah.
66 A: [Yes.
67 N: Umm. No?
68 I: That’s right. You missed the last session.
69 N: Uh-huh.
70 I: Let’s see (1.1) I must have extra sheets here. ((I checks his folders)) (3.0) Here. Here you
71 go. ((I passes a sheet to Nancy))
72 N: Thank you.
73 I: Nancy, why don’t you work with Katy? Annie and Judy, a:nd Beth and Jean.
74 K: OK, I go first. OK?
75 N: Sorry?

76 K: Oh, I'm A a:nd you are B?
77 N: Oh, all right.
78 K: Nancy, what did you get for #1?
79 N: Uh: I don't know. (1.2) What - should I do?
80 K: OK, - you just read this part. ((points to the line)) Okay?
81 N: Ah: I see. (2.0) I chose a.
82 K: A: nd? ((points to the sheet again))
83 N: (0.8) And how about you?
84 K: Oh, me too.
85 N: U:mm.
86 K: And you say,
87 N: Oh - great.
88 K: Great! Understand?
89 N: Yes. ((smiles))
90 K: Good. Let's try #2. How about change - you start first this time?
91 N: Sure. What did you get for #2?
92 K: Maybe you can call me? ((points to the first line on the sheet))
93 N: Oh, OK. Katy, what did you get for #2?
94 K: Well, I got c. And - you?
95 N: I got d.
96 K: Really? Let's ask Annie.
97 N: Yes, let's.
98 K: Annie, ((Annie is working with Judy and doesn't hear Katy.)) (3.6) Annie! ((Annie
99 notices Katy calling her.))
100A: Yes. (0.8) What is it?
101K: We are not sure #2. (1.0) What did you guys get?
102A: #2? We got c. (1.6) Right, Judy?
103J: Yes.
104K: Good, thank you.

In lines 75-79, Nancy's initial confusion is obvious ("Uh: I don't know.") In fact, she asks Katy for clarification. Katy then starts to scaffold Nancy's performance (see underlined parts). Here, we notice that Katy plays the scaffolding role of the instructor, helping Nancy achieve something which she alone could not have done. She also makes evaluative comments such as "Great!" (line 88) and "Good." (line 90) and confirmation checks such as "Okay?" (line 80) and "Understand?" (line 88). In line 90, she suggests that they switch roles by saying "How about change - you start first this time?" From

Katy's performance, which parallels that of the instructor in Excerpt 1, we can infer that she adapted some pedagogical strategies from her teacher(s) (Mercer, 1992). In the debriefing session, Nancy commented that she was very glad to have worked with Katy; who willingly guided her performance. Katy likewise commented that she in fact enjoyed helping a member of the class. In short, here, Katy can be seen as an expert initiating Nancy, a novice, into the appropriate discourse of the community. In fact, this type of socialization was observed in various types of classroom activities throughout the course.

Flex Day

As mentioned above, the seminar was three months in length, and the course syllabus was developed based on a needs analysis conducted prior to the first meeting. To deal with unexpected delays in following the plan, the sixth meeting was designed as a flex day, with no particular agenda specified in the syllabus for this day. At the fourth meeting, students were asked to think about what they would like to do on the Flex Day other than activities and exercises planned by the instructor. At the fifth meeting, students and the instructor discussed possibilities from covering another grammar topic to working on oral skills. Most of them expressed concern about their lack of ability to express their opinions in English. One of them said that it was especially challenging for her to explain her choices when checking answers with her classmates, and the rest of the class agreed with her. The instructor thus promised to prepare a communicative task, which would allow them to practice expressing their opinions. The instructor then selected a problem-solving or decision-making task from Saito (1996).

The Problem-Solving Task. As mentioned earlier, the class agreed to do a problem-solving task at the sixth meeting. The selected task was called "The Island" (Saito, 1996). In this task, pairs of students were given a story of six people who are stranded on an uncharted island, and were required to negotiate in what order the characters should be rescued in order to reach a consensus and to make pair rankings. In other words, students were asked to converge on a solution (Duff, 1986). Thus, it was predicted that students would have many opportunities to state reasons for their choices. Before starting the task, the instructor wrote on the board useful expressions listed in Saito (1996) and had students practice them.

Excerpt 4: The Island Task

105I: So - first make your individual list, then u:mm discuss your choice, a:nd reach a
106 consensus. I'd like your pair list after the discussion. OK?
107A: [OK. So we're supposed to reach- umm what do you say?=
108K: [OK. = to reach con- consensus? And (0.6) come up with a list?

109I: That's right. Have fun. ((I goes to another pair.))
110K: Thank you. ((laughs))
111A: Yes. ((laughs)) So, we start?
112K: Yes.
113A: ((looking at Katy's chart)) You chose a high school boy.
114K: [Yeah.
115A: [Yeah. I chose a sick man [in his sixties.
116K: [Maybe later we will decide it?
117A: Oh, you mean ranking?
118K: Yes. [Ranking and reason.
119A: [Okay. And [How about number two?
120K: [How about number two? I chose a three-month pregnant women.
121A: Oh, really? Uh: me, too.
122K: How about x. Oh, okay. How about three?
123A: I chose a high school boy.
124K: Oh, really? I chose different one.
125A: Uh-huh.

This short excerpt manifests the influence of the CAP sheet on the students' interactional patterns. Although they are not looking at the sheet at this point, Katy and Anny are apparently using its structure in this interaction (see underlined parts). This can be considered as evidence of their learning. It is likely that they have incorporated the discourse structure into their linguistic repertoire through repeated use of the sheet in class.

5. Discussion

The analysis of transcribed discourse, coupled with students' comments, has led to the formulation of the following findings and implications. First, teacher-student interaction and peer interaction provided students in the EFL course with scaffolds, both intentional and incidental, allowing them to achieve something which they could perhaps not have done by themselves. Data indicate that students assisted one another in learning their classroom discourse. In other words, participants co-constructed their answer-checking activities. This type of language socialization was often observed in the present classroom context.

Second, the CAP sheet turned out to be an effective tool for those beginning and intermediate-level students, who had initially lacked the linguistic knowledge to compare their answers with their peers. Here, it can be argued that the sheet allowed the students to access meaningful, although not truly authentic, classroom interaction. In

other words, the use of the sheet can be seen as one type of pedagogical scaffolding. Katy and Annie's task interaction indicated that they have successfully incorporated those prefabricated expressions into their linguistic repertoire through constant use of the sheet in class. Annie commented that:

> I believe that the check sheet was very helpful, because I did not know how to ask questions in a class, like some appropriate way to compare answers with my classmates. Actually, I still use it in other classes at Victory.

Recall that students were introduced to expressions as needed and encouraged to write them on the CAP sheet for their future use (see Excerpt 2). In short, recycling those prefabricated expressions in meaningful contexts such as the ones described in this paper appears to assist learners in their language learning processes (cf. Krashen, 1981). Additionally, it should be noted that the size of the Communicative Grammar class was very small, making it possible for the instructor to closely monitor his students' performances. Thus one may wonder if the CAP sheet would be as effective in larger classes. We would argue, however, that the principle is the same. Although the instructor would perhaps not be able to monitor students' performances as closely, he would still be able to model the use of the sheet to the class with a few students. Like Mohan and Marshall Smith (1992), we believe that language socialization can take place through observation, which provides the novice with learning opportunities and allows them to eventually appropriate the skilled practices of experienced members of their community. Of course, the use of the CAP sheet in larger classes remains to be investigated.

Furthermore, the use of the CAP sheet seemed to have provided a non-threatening, non-competitive learning context. Most students commented in the end-of-the-course evaluation that they appreciated having the chance to check their answers in pairs before presenting them to the whole class. One student, Beth, said that she felt secure in offering her ideas to the whole group, knowing that there was someone who shared these ideas, and that even when her partner had a different answer, she did not feel uncomfortable because she knew that her peers were feeling the same way. Kagan (1994) states that students' anxiety can be alleviated if they are allowed to affiliate with others in class. Another student, Judy, commented, "Every time we check answers, we have some differences and learn from each other. It is natural that students make mistakes. I learned this through the answer-checking activity. But we can always say 'Let's ask our teacher.'" (translated by the first author). Clearly, students have thought about why they were using the CAP sheet, and figured it out in their own ways.

6. Conclusions

From a sociocultural perspective, the present paper has examined EFL students' learning of a particular activity, namely, checking answers in pairs. Data, although limited in scope, have shown that not only the instructor but also students provided one another with a variety of scaffolds in order to help them acquire classroom routines. We could not agree more with Golebiowska (1990) when he says that teachers "should not overlook the genuine–even if linguistically and communicatively limited–opportunities offered by the consistent use of English as the language of classroom management" (p. 2). Here, we argue that teachers should constantly examine "the linguistic and interactional demands embedded in classroom events" (Johnson, 1995, p. 152) so as to provide guidance and assistance that are responsive to students' needs (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992).

As mentioned earlier, the size of the class in this study is relatively small. Thus, it would be worthwhile to examine the learning of classroom discourse in larger groups of students. Nonetheless, the present study has shed some useful light on the positive nature of the CAP sheet. This tool, it seems, allowed students to participate in classroom interactions more actively, thus providing them more opportunities for learning.

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Appendix

Check Your Answers with Your Partner(s)

A: _____ (your partner's name), What did you get (choose) for # _____ ?

B: Well, I got (chose) _____. How about you?

A: (1) Me, too! [to agree]

A: (2) Really? I chose _____ [to indicate that you have a different answer]. Why did you choose _____? _____

B: (1) Great! /Good!

B: (2) Because _____ .

Other Useful Expressions

1. I'm not sure about # _____.
2. I don't know the answer.
3. I agree.
4. Sorry? / Pardon (me)? / Excuse me?
5. You said _____? / Did you say _____?
6. What do you mean?
7. Shall we ask _____ (name)?

And more – make add more expressions as you learn.

要旨

コミュニケーション活動への参加過程：
日本人英語学習者のケース

小林恵美・小林真記

本研究は、第二言語学習者が授業におけるコミュニケーション活動へ参加していく過程を考察する。第二言語習得研究によって、情報交換を必要とするタスクを用いたグループ活動は、意味交渉や言語産出の機会をより多く提供すると考えられるようになった。この考えの根底には、学習者は、目標言語を用いて活動を行うことができるという前提がある。しかしながら、日本のように英語を外国語として学んでいる（EFL）学習者にそうした活動に参加するために必要な英語力が備わっているとは限らない。本稿では、学習者による目標言語での授業活動への参加を促すために一教師が行った試みについて報告する。