A Functional Analysis of EFL Students' Discourse

in the Social Practice of Learning to Play a Board Game

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Keywords

social practice, second language, discourse analysis, language socialization, board game

Abstract

How do second language (L2) students learn a social practice in their target language? This paper reports on some of the findings of a qualitative study that took a sociocultural approach (e.g., Bruner, 1983; Rogoff, 1990; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) to examine how a group of five EFL students learned the social practice of board gaming. A social practice theory analysis (Mohan, 2007) showed that the students worked together to help each other participate in the game and to create a shared understanding of its rules and procedures, revealing how action and reflection discourses were woven together. The analysis also illustrated how the students as active agents altered one of the rules of the game as well as how a relatively novice player, after receiving assistance from more experienced players and observing other players' actions, assumed a more active role as the play progressed. These findings highlight the important co-construction of actions, roles, and understanding that takes place through L2 collaborative discourse in learning to play a game.

1. Introduction

A great number of games have hitherto been developed to be used in second language (L2) classrooms (e.g., Crookall & Oxford, 1990; Shameem & Tickoo, 1999; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2009; Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 1984). These are pedagogically driven serious activities involving goal-oriented communication and competition among players through oral and/or written language, which are performed

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mainly for the sake of their contribution to L2 learning (Richards & Schmidt, 2002; Ur, 2009; see Sykes & Reinhardt, 2013, for a relevant distinction between *game-based* and *game-enhanced* L2 teaching/learning). What about games or activities designed for recreational purposes? In the recent years, there has been a growing research interest in the use of digital games in L2 teaching and learning (e.g., Peterson, 2012; Piirainen-Marsh & Tainio, 2009; Sykes & Reinhardt, 2013; Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009). For instance, Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio (2009) explored opportunities for L2 learning that a collaborative gaming activity offered two teenage Finnish speakers of English. Their analysis of the discourse showed that the players drew upon the language of the game, including vocabulary, utterances, and prosodic features, often making creative use of these resources for their own ends. Peterson's (2012) qualitative study examined four EFL learners' participation in an online role playing game involving native speakers of English. His analysis of the discourse revealed interactional features deemed conducive to the development of sociocultural competence, such as extensive L2 use, appropriate use of politeness, and collaborative construction and maintenance of intersubjectivity. Likewise, the present study examines EFL students' participation in a non-pedagogical game, but it focuses on how these participants learned to play a more traditional board game in their target language.

       Central to the present study is the conceptualization of a game as a social practice. For instance, Guberman (1999) suggests that games can be considered as "cultural practices, reflecting and fostering cultural values, skills, and ways of behaving" (p. 217). Likewise, Mohan (2007) views games as social practices that involve action and theoretical understanding (see also Mohan, 1986; Mohan & Lee, 2006). Thus, gaming can be seen as an activity that provides rich opportunities for learning both language and culture (e.g., Ervin-Tripp, 1986; Mohan, 1987, 2007).

       According to Mohan (2007), a social practice entails purposeful use of language and consists of cultural action and knowledge in a theory-practice connection. To understand students' learning of social practice therefore requires a discourse analytic method that allows us to distinguish theory from practice. For example, Mohan and Lee (2006) illustrate how the card game of bridge entails both knowing and doing by using a functional analysis of the players' oral discourse (see also Mohan, 1987). Other researchers have used this approach to examine how ESL/EFL students made theory-practice connections through classroom discourse in different content areas such as science (Mohan & Slater, 2005, 2006) and intercultural communication (Kobayashi, 2006), as well as through reflection involved in the process of writing a language learning history for a language course (Kobayashi & Kobayashi, 2007).

The present study aims to contribute to this line of research by examining EFL students' learning of a non-pedagogical board game designed for English-speakers. What do expert-players do to facilitate their peers' participation in the game? What do novice-players do to get assistance from others? These are questions that guided the present study.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws primarily upon the perspectives of language socialization (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) and systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1978). According to Schieffelin and Ochs (1986), children and other newcomers to a community gain sociocultural competence and confidence as they repeatedly observe and participate in language-mediated interactions with more experienced members of that community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, in this process, newcomers are not seen as passive recipients of information, rather as active agents of their own socialization, constantly redefining and reshaping their activities (Rogoff, 1990; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). While originally developed to examine how children acquire both linguistic and sociocultural knowledge in their L1 communities, the theory of language socialization has recently been applied to L2 studies (see Duff, 2012, for a review).

Similarly, SFL sees language as a resource for meaning making and language learning as language socialization (Halliday, 1978; Mohan, 1987). Thus, learners are viewed as extending their linguistic and discursive repertoire through their engagement in socioculturally valued practices. As we will see later, this study will use Mohan's social practice theory analysis, which draws upon the SFL perspective. Furthermore, the present study is guided by the neo-Vygotskian notion of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976; see also Bruner, 1983), which is defined by Gibbons (2002) as "a special kind of assistance that assists learners to move toward new skills, concepts, or levels of understanding" (p. 10). Scaffolding is deemed to be an essential part of students' learning of a social practice.

3. Methodology
Participants and Data Collection

Participants for this study were five Japanese undergraduate students (three females and two males) majoring in English at a four-year private university in Japan (see Table 1 for participants' profiles). They were asked to play an American game, *Monopoly*. The main object of this board game is "to become the wealthiest player

through buying, renting and selling property" (see Monopoly Rulebook, p. 1). Two of the participants (Shun and Mika) had played the game while the others (Kumi, Takeshi, and Anna) had not. Thus, Shun and Mika could be considered as relative old-timers. Also, Shun was by far the most proficient English speaker of all the participants. Although the participants gathered for the sake of the present study, they knew each other either because they were enrolled in the same seminar or because they had taken courses together.

pseudonym	sex	age	TOEIC	Monopoly Experience (as of Day 1)
Shun	male	21	**950**	**yes**
Kumi	female	21	710	no
Mika	female	21	680	**yes**
Takeshi	male	21	555	no
Anna	female	28	730	no

Table 1: Participants' Profiles

The participants were observed and audio-recorded as they played the game in a classroom on two days. Field notes were taken by one of the researchers during the observations to help better understand and interpret the recorded discourse. Immediately after each session, the participants were asked to write what they had learned about the game (reflection sheet), which was followed by semi-structured interviews to gain the participants' perspectives.
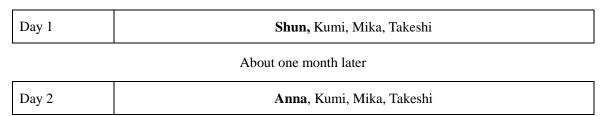
Day 1	**Shun,** Kumi, Mika, Takeshi

<div align="center">About one month later</div>

Day 2	**Anna**, Kumi, Mika, Takeshi

Table 2: The Players

Discourse Analysis

Recorded interactions were transcribed following the transcription conventions presented by Duff (1995, 2000, see Appendix A) and analyzed by using Mohan's (1986, 2007) social practice theory analysis discussed earlier. Central to this functional

approach is the concept of social practice, which is defined by Mohan (2007) as "a unit of culture that involves cultural knowledge and cultural action in a theory/practice, reflection/action relations" (p. 304). Mohan (1986, 2007) views a social practice as consisting of both action and theoretical understanding and of six knowledge structures (KSs) or "semantics patterns of the discourse, knowledge, actions, artifacts, and environment of a social practice" (Mohan, 2007, p. 303): namely, description (of circumstances or conditions), sequence (of actions and events), choice (i.e., decisions), classification, principles (e.g., rules, cause and effects, means-end relations), and evaluation (i.e., values). The first three KSs are associated with practical discourse whereas the others are associated with theoretical discourse. One major difference between these two types of discourse lies in whether they have a generic referent. According to Mohan (1998),

> A description of a particular person, place, or thing may be related to a classification or set of general concepts; a particular time sequence of states, events, or actions may be related to general principles (social rules or cause effects relations) that link one state to another; and a particular choice or decision may relate to general values. (p. 175)

Mohan (1986) stresses the importance of learning both types of discourse, saying that "without the practical, students cannot apply what they know; without the theoretical, students cannot understand what they are doing, nor transfer what they know" (p. 43). In short, knowledge structures are thinking skills which are translated into rhetorical patterns in the discourse of a social practice.

First, transcribed utterances were divided into three categories proposed by Mohan (2007; Mohan & Lee, 2006): generic reflection, specific reflection, and action. Here, we have two discourse contrasts. The first contrast is reflection versus action. The former refers to what the speaker is talking about (i.e., the topic) whereas the latter refers to what the speaker is doing (i.e., speech act). The second contrast is generic reflection versus specific reflection. The former refers to what is general (e.g., rules of the game, types of tokens) whereas the latter refers to what is particular (e.g., comments on specific moves). The data were then coded for knowledge structures and repair features such as clarification requests and confirmation checks (see Appendix B).

4. Findings

Starting the Game (Day 1)

　　Excerpt 1 shows the beginning of the game on Day 1. Because of this, there are multiple instances of scaffolding. First, the two experienced players, Shun and Mika, explain the goal of the game between lines 17 and 18. Interestingly, Mika builds on Shun's previous utterance by reading the relevant part of the rule book out loud. Second, Mika shows the sequence of the game to the two novice players, Takeshi and Kumi, through modeling (lines 27-33). Her utterances, "Watch" (line 27) and "Do you understand the procedure?" (line 39) indicate the beginning and end of the modeling, respectively. Third, the participants negotiate the meaning of key terms such as *Banker* (lines 6-9), *property* (lines 18-21), and *double* (lines 43-47). In each of these exchanges, a participant makes an utterance which contains an unfamiliar term for a novice player, so the novice makes a clarification request, and then an expert player explains the term, which results in the novice's understanding of the term. For example, Mika defines the term *banker,* using the phrase "someone umm to take care of money" (line 8). This contribution contains a generic referent *someone* and shows the knowledge structure of classification. In response to Kumi's question, "what's double?" (line 44), Mika first refers to a specific referent (the dice) and describes the meaning of the word. In the next turn (line 47), Shun explains the rule or principle of the game, using the generic referent *you*. These utterances seem to result in Kumi's learning in line 48.

Excerpt 1

	Speaker	**Specific reflection**	**Generic reflection**	**Action**
1	Shun	Okay, does everybody have a token and umm money?		
2	Shun	How much was it?		
3	Mika	$1500.00.		
4	Kumi	Uh-huh.		
5	Takeshi	Okay.		
6	Shun	And I think - we need to: decide uh: the banker?		
7	Kumi		Banker?	
8	Mika		Yeah, we need	

			someone umm to take care of money.	
9	Kumi		Uh: I see.	
10	Shun	Okay. I'll be the banker.		
12	Shun	Then, who should go first? Do you wanna go first, Takeshi?		
13	Takeshi	Oh: (0.8) umm (0.5) maybe not.		
14	Takeshi	This is uh (0.5) my uh first time, umm so: I don't know.		
15	Shun	Maybe YOU should go first, Mika?		
16	Mika	Okay.		
17	Shun		Oh, before I forget, umm in this game the goal is to become the richest person.	
18	Mika		Yeah, this book says, (1.2) "the object of the game (0.5) is to become the wealthiest player through buying, renting, and selling property." ((reads from the rule book))	
19	Kumi		Property? What does it mean?	
20	Mika		Oh, property is like	

			umm houses, and lands.	
21	Kumi		Oh, okay.	
25	Mika			Okay, so: can I begin?
26				((Everyone nods.))
27	Mika			Okay. Watch. ((laugh))
28	Mika	First, umm roll the dice?		((rolls the dice))
29	Mika	Six.		
30	Mika	So: I move uh six spaces.		
31	Mika	One, two, three, four, five, six.		
32	Mika	Then, stop here,		
33	Mika	umm Oriental Avenue.		
34	Shun			So do you wanna buy it?
35	Mika			Okay, I'll buy it.
36	Shun			Sure, $100.00 please. ((Looks for the property card))
37	Shun			Here you are.
38	Mika			Thank you.
39	Mika	Do you understand the procedure? ((asks Kumi and Takeshi))		
40		((Kumi and Takeshi nod))		
41	Shun			Who's next?
42	Mika			Oh, it's my turn.
43	Mika	Because, uh: I got a double. =		
44	Kumi		= What's double?	

	Speaker			
45	Mika			Look here. ((points to the dice))
46	Mika	Same number. So: it's a double.		
47	Shun		Yeah, uh when you get a double, umm you get to roll the dice uh once again.	
48	Kumi		AH: I see.	
49	Kumi			So, it's your turn again? ((to Mika))
50	Mika			Uh-huh.

Learning to Claim Ownership (Day 1)

As mentioned earlier, to win the game of Monopoly, players need to become the wealthiest. Land owners can collect rent from other players if they land on their properties. As such, one important function to be performed in this game is to claim ownership. This can be done non-verbally by simply showing the Title Deed Card or verbally by performing a speech act. The following excerpt shows how Takeshi, a first-timer player, learned to claim ownership from Mika. In this excerpt, Shun lands on one of Takeshi's properties. Mika prompts Takeshi to say "I own it." Confused by this prompt, Takeshi asks Mika what this expression means (line 12) or why he is encouraged to say that (line 14). Mika then explains what it means to say "I own it" in the context of this game (line 13 & line 17). The other two players, Kumi and Shun, join the conversation by adding explanations. Notice that Kumi's explanation in line 15 is particular as indicated by her use of a specific referent (i.e., Shun) while Shun's explanation in line 21 is almost as generic as that of the rule book.

Excerpt 2

	Speaker	Specific reflection	Generic reflection	Action
1	Mika			It's your turn, Shun.
2	Shun			Okay. ((rolls the dice))
3		(5.8) Seven. One two three four five six seven.		

		Broadway. Oh -		
4	Mika	((to Takeshi)) **Tell him (0.6) you own it.**		
5	Take	What?		
6	Mika	**Say – I own it.**		
7	Take	**I- I own?**		
8	Mika	**Yes. Own it.**		
9	Take			**Own it. I own it.**
10	Shun			Oh no.
11	Mika			Sorry, Shun. Ahahaha ((laughs))
12	Take	But - what does it mean?		
13	Mika	You have it.		
14	Take	Ah: but why I- (0.6) do I say that.		
15	Kumi	Because Shun has to pay you.		
16	Take	Pay you- (0.5) pay me?		
17	Mika	It's yours because you bought it. (0.8) A:nd he - stopped there and he has to pay you.		
18	Take	[Ah:::		
19	Kumi	[It's a rent?		
20	Take	Ah:::		
21	Shun		Remember, if- if a player lands on someone else's property, um he or she must pay the amount printed on the card.	

22	Shun	So I owe you - this much. ((showing the card))		
23	Take	Oh: okay.		
24	Shun			Here it is. ((gives the money))
25	Take			Oh, thank you.

Ignoring the Rule (Day 1)

Although the participants occasionally consulted the rule book, this does not necessarily mean that they followed all the rules. Excerpt 3 illustrates a case where the participants decided not to follow the official rule. As Line 4 shows, Kumi lands on Park Place, but thinks that it is "too expensive" and decides not to buy the property (line 7). Then, the next player, Takeshi asks if it is his turn (line 12). In the following turn, Mika suggests that it is still Kumi's turn and reads the relevant part of the rule book. However, Shun, the most proficient speaker of English with Monopoly experience, states in the following turn that he has never followed the particular rule about auctioning an unowned property. Mika agrees, suggesting that they ignore the rule.

Excerpt 3

	Speaker	**Specific reflection**	**Generic reflection**	**Action**
1	Kumi			Ok. I want Community Chest. ((rolls the dice))
2	Kumi	Please, five. OH:, [nine.((sounds disappointed))		
3	Mika:	[Nine.		
4	Kumi	One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. Park Place.		
6	Shun	Nobody owns it.		Do you wanna buy it?
7	Kumi			$350.00? H:mm. Too expensive. I don't want it.

8	Shun	Are you sure? ((smiles and looks at Mika))		
9	Kumi	Yes, I'm sure.		
10	Shun	Are you really sure? ((smiling))		
11	Kumi	Yes.		
12	Takeshi	Then, uh it's my turn?		((rolls the dice))
13	Mika	No, not yet.		
14	Mika		I think ((looking at the rule book)). (5.2) *Atta*. "if you do not wish to buy the property, the Banker auctions it to the highest bitter." So::	
15	Takeshi		What [do you mean?	
16	Shun		[Oh really? **I didn't know that. I've never done it before.**	
17	Mika:		Okay. **Let's ignore.**	
18	Kumi:		Okay.	
19	Shun:		Great.	

Becoming a Relative Expert (Day 2)

      Excerpt 4 comes from Day 2, when Shun could not participate, but a new member, Anna, joined instead. In this excerpt, Anna rolls the dice and lands on Kumi's property. In line 5, Kumi asks Anna to pay $20. But she is not sure and asks why she has to pay. Mika then says, "It's Kumi's place." and starts to produce another utterance. However, she seems to have difficulty continuing. Although Mika manages to say "bought," Takeshi starts to complete her previous utterance by saying "own it." Recall that this is the very expression that Takeshi was encouraged by Mika to use on Day 1. Takeshi seems to have learned how to use the expression from the first session. In fact, Takeshi wrote in his reflection, "If I bought any places, and anyone stopped my bought place, the person have to pay rent for me. I have to remember to say I own it."

Excerpt 4

	Speaker	Specific reflection	Generic reflection	Action
1	Anna			My turn, right?
2	Kumi			Yeah.
3	Anna			((rolls the dice)) (5.0)
4		Five. One two three four FIVE.		
5	Kumi			Welcome. It's mine. (3.2) Twenty dollars please.
6	Anna	Twenty dollars? Why?		
7	Mika	It's Kumi's place. She: : - [bought		
8	Take	[own it?		
9	Mika	Yeah she own it. So you must pay her rent.		
10	Anna	Oh – I see.		
11	Anna			Here you go. ((gives the bill))
12	Kumi			Thank you. ((smiles))
13	Mika		So if you are the owner, (1.5) you can collect money from the player. But if you forget, you can't. So you must memorize it.	
14	Anna		Oh: really.	

Particularly noteworthy about this excerpt is Kumi's and Takeshi's increasing participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Kumi successfully performed a series of speech acts: claiming her ownership, asking for the rent (line 5), and thanking (line 12). Takeshi made only one utterance in this excerpt; however, this was a self-initiated move that contained an expression that he had learned from his peers. Trivial as it seems, this contribution seems to evidence Takeshi's greater willingness to participate in the game.

5. Discussion & Conclusions

In this paper, we have examined evidence of EFL students' learning in a non-pedagogical game, using social practice theory analysis. Data show many instances where cultural knowledge—knowledge about the game—was co-constructed successfully through L2-mediated interactions between those who had previously played the game (expert players) and those who had not (novice players). Expert players used modeling, comment, explanation, and questioning to assist the novices in learning the activity (Mohan & Marshall Smith, 1992). On the other hand, the novices too tried to learn the social practice of the game by making clarification requests and confirmation checks. This suggests their active involvement in the L2-mediated activity. As Excerpts 1 and 3 have shown, especially in early stages of the play, the students often consulted the rulebook and read aloud from it to negotiate rules and decide on the best course of action. This meshes with Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio's (2009) argument that reading aloud or voicing textual information such as game instructions allows the players "to attend to and index choices in game-play and negotiate them in the course of play" (p. 179). Additionally, during the interview, the three novice players reported that they had learned a number of expressions from their friends, including "I own that" and "Can I get $200.00 for passing Go?"

While the students were willing to learn the social practice of the game, they did not simply accept its intended activity structure as it was. As we have seen in Excerpt 3, they decided not to follow the rule about auctioning. This type of alteration was reported in Guberman's (1999) study with children engaged in mathematical activities. We could not agree more with Guberman when he says, "Tasks and environments are not unchanging and independent of the people acting in them. Rather, they must be understood as flexible, emergent constructions that reflect both cultural achievements and values and the interpretive, sense-making processes of participants" (p. 223).

One limitation of the present study has to do with its design. Since the learning situation was set up by the researchers for the sake of research and data were collected only on two occasions, the study failed to connect microgenetic analysis of student-student discourse with more ethnographic accounts of cultural ways of behaving (or what Gee (1996) refers to as "Discourses") into which newcomers are apprenticed[4] (see Schieffelin & Ochs, 1996, for a relevant discussion). Nonetheless, the social practice theory analysis has illustrated visually how players' actions and reflective discourse were woven together in their interaction during the board-gaming. Also, it has

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[4] Therefore, we do not claim that this is a study of language socialization, rather a study informed by the perspective of language socialization.

provided evidence of student learning and its dynamic, co-constructed nature; that is, the participants worked together to negotiate the rules and procedure of the game, thereby co-constructing their actions, roles, and understandings (Mohan, 1998).

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A

Transcription Conventions

=	speech that comes immediately after another person's (i.e., latched utterances), shown for both speakers
(words)	words not clearly heard, (x), an unclear word
((comments))	researcher comments or relevant details regarding interaction
:	unusually lengthened sound
.	terminal falling intonation
,	rising, continuing intonation
?	high rising intonation, not necessarily at the end of a sentence
- (unattached)	brief, untimed pause
(y.y)	timed pause
x-	(attached on one side) self-correction or false start
'utterances/sentences'	attempts to reconstruct others' words (oral or written)
bold-faced	focal utterance of point of discussion for analytical purposes
CAPITAL LETTERS	loud speech
underlining	spoken with emphasis

Adapted from Duff (1995, 2000)

Appendix B: Repair Exponent

clarification request	a request for further information from an interlocutor about a previous utterance
confirmation check	the speaker's query as to whether or not the speaker's (expressed) understanding of the interlocutor's meaning is correct
comprehension check	the speaker's query of the interlocutor(s) as to whether or not they have understood the previous speaker utterance(s)

(taken from Chaudron, 1988, p. 45)

要旨

ボードゲームの社会的実践における英語学習者の談話：

機能的分析

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第二言語学習者は、どのように目標言語で社会的実践を学ぶのであろうか。本稿は、EFL 学生 5 名がボードゲームの社会的実践をいかに学んだのかを、社会文化的アプローチ（e.g., Bruner, 1983；Rogoff, 1990；Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986）により分析した質的研究の結果を報告するものである。社会的実践理論分析（Mohan, 2007）によって、研究に参加した学生達が互いのゲームへの参加とゲームルールや進め方に関する共通理解の助けをし、そうした中で行動の談話と内省の談話が織り込まれていることが明らかになった。また、分析によって、いかに学生達が、能動的主体として、あるゲームルールを変えたのか、さらには、ゲーム初心者である学生が、より経験のある参加者から援助を受けたり、他の参加者の行動を観察したりしながら、ゲームが進むにつれてより積極的な役割を担うようになったのかも明らかになった。こうした結果は、ゲームを学ぶ際に第二言語で行われる協動的談話を通じて起こる、行動・役割・理解の重要な共同構築を際立てるものである。