Acquiring a Second Culture through Discourse in a Second Language

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ABSTRACT

How do second language learners acquire cultural expertise from each other through performance of non-didactic tasks in a second language? This study examines evidence for exchange of cultural knowledge in the discourse of two-way bilingual tasks undertaken by learners of English and Japanese as a second language.

The study treats the classroom as a natural setting for use of cultural expertise as a communicative resource. Analysis of approximately 12 hours of audio-taped exchanges generated during Japanese-English, two-way bilingual tasks reveals opportunistic exchange of cultural knowledge through the medium of both languages. That is, one's native cultural competence is employed selectively as a conversational resource and frequently serves as the basis of intensive negotiation with cultural novices within the cooperative framework, knowledge structure and contextual demands of the task. The sorts of scaffolded interaction reported in the literature as supporting second language learning also appear to support exchange of specific forms of cultural expertise. Focusing on transfer of conceptual knowledge between experts and novices, discourse analysis suggests that collocation (and possibly synonomy and analogy) function to link novice and expert knowledge structures.

Key words: culture learning, second language learning, learning task, scaffolding

1. Introduction

Language teachers often treat culture as an appendage to the second language syllabus--a collection of topics and background information, illustrations, rules, and injunctions that are added to lessons and units of instruction as stand-ins for pragmatic knowledge of a second language. We have been slow to recognize that language swims within the larger sea of culture that is recapitulated each time speakers of different languages engage each other in ordinary social life. Pragmatic knowledge of a second language is, fundamentally, cultural knowledge acquired largely implicitly in numerous, unexceptional, varied interactions with sources of second culture expertise. The range of what counts as language-in-culture is enormous, given the importance of language in expressing both the elementary concepts and central values of a people (Kramsch, 1993).

How, then, do learners of a second language begin to acquire these elementary and central facets of cultural knowledge that are the stuff of everyday life? The question is something like the one that has been asked about second language acquisition for the past four decades, namely, what mental processes underly the acquisition of a second language and how is this competence eventually realized in contexts of use? In both cases, we observe individuals who, even if not fully formed in their first language (L1) and culture (C1), are able to approach a second language (L2) and culture (C2) with a reservoir of background knowledge and experience. With this resevoir of experience in mind, we look to L2/C2 learners' participation in social interaction with competent members of a C2 as the distinguishing characteristic of C2 acquisition; that is, it is the fact of acquisition of cultural competence *through and in* social processes that renders the study of second language acquisition *per se* an inadequate basis to

account for the ability of second language learners to participate competently in cultures other than their own.

In this paper, I want to look at some of the ways social interaction between members of different language and cultural communities tacitly and contingently supports the acquisition of *conceptual knowledge for use*--a specific form of cultural expertise that is exchanged between cultural experts and novices as an essential part of their participation in non-didactic discourse organized within a larger educational setting. I want to suggest the educational uses of an understanding of this sort of discourse, and will point directly to the importance of treating second language learning within the larger framework of second language socialization (Ochs, 1988, 1993; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1988).

2.0 Perspectives

One of the more enduring insights into the social communication of cultural knowledge is that "form and meaning of texts are partially engendered by structural expectations (have a social history) but as well are interactionally negotiated" (Ochs, 1988: 23). Language develops within negotiated dialogic activity and evolves in its capacity to accomplish social goals, including induction of novices into the knowledge and practices of the community. "Novices" within the framework of this paper, is used synonymously with learners from other speech communities and cultures who, even for short periods, become participants in social interaction with competent speakers and cultural experts--and who share the primary goals of the ongoing activity. Thus, given the perspective of language socialization, negotiation between individuals with differing states of knowledge appears to be a pivotal activity through which cultural expertise is communicated (see, also, Vygotsky, 1978 on dialogic activity and *internalization*)

This language-and-culture stance resembles an earlier position taken by second language acquisition theorists, those in particular who staked out an interactionist basis for acquisition, that looked at the processes through which learners are supported at every step by their interlocutors (Gass and Varonis, 1985, 1991; Hatch, 1978, 1992; Long, 1985, 1990; Long and Crookes 1992, 1993) once a learner evinces a problem with input from an interlocutor or a specific need for information. The following excerpt from Hatch (1992: 214), for example, illustrates a key process that effectively extends the application of language to accomplish a specific goal, namely the use of verbal *scaffolding* by one of the participants on behalf of the other:

Paul: Oh-oh!

Jim: What?

Paul: This *(points to an ant).*

Jim: It's an ant.

Here Jim responds to Paul's excitement, offers a slot in the dialogue to name the insect and then supplies the name when Paul demonstrates he wants to know it. Scaffolding is ultimately concerned with the social construction of knowledge and with some form of change within the competence of participants within the discourse. Donato (1994) additionally uses the term "collective scaffolding" (p. 46) to capture the sense of collaborative effort and reciprocal change that are entailed in expert-novice conversations (see also Ochs, 1990 re: *indexicality* and socialization). The functional range of scaffolding includes, as Donato notes (p. 50) the "disinhibition" of participation and eventually the extension of input that might never occur in such other contexts as teacher-fronted classrooms. Scaffolding also offers learners an opportunity for novices to "participate in the mature task from the very beginning" (Cazden, 1988: 107), since it is provided as needed by the conventions of social interaction and withdrawn when it is no longer needed.

One unresolved issue that brings us through second language acquisition and well into language-centred processes of acculturation is the problem of what comprises cultural knowledge. Paul's ant is arguably outside of the limits of cultural knowledge: His concept of *ant* acquired in the L1 may be pretty much what Jim understands when he gives Paul's exophoric reference a name. But then again, it may not. Each situation that involves unique contextual and extra-contextual constraints (such as prior knowledge) will offer a unique stage for negotiating talk and for coming to understand the range of meanings that distinguish the novice from the expert.

This is precisely the problem the ethnographer faces when attempting to discover the shared, tacit meanings of things within a culture--given the premise of symbolic interactionism (Spradley, 1980) that meaning arises from social interaction--and when making inferences about what cultural meanings are included within the use of a particular term. The limited number of *semantic relationships* shared cross-culturally (following Spradley) makes it possible to examine the extent of comparability between what *A* knows and can express and what *B* knows and can express. A "strict inclusion" relationship (*X* is a kind of *Y*), for instance, of a kind that distinguishes Jim's from Paul's understanding of what an ant is, may eventually be demonstrated in or inferred from their talk ("an ant is a kind of insect", "an ant is a kind of insect deity"). Or, in the absence of signals that achieve a particular cooperative scrutiny of the term, participants may well continue their meaning making with other things in mind. The point here is that all expert - novice, intercultural discourse has the potential to lead its participants into intercultural explorations that achieve socialization through language. Whether they do or not inevitably entails inspection of the microethnographic record.

Speculations about the kinds of culture transfer that may be occasioned during intercultural communication are presented in Liu (1995) who undertook to establish through a survey methodology how basic values within North American culture are acquired by learners from other cultures. Liu employs the term *sociocultural transfer* (also Beebe, 1988) to capture the sense of acquiring the values of a C2 through immersion and interaction with holders of C2 expertise. Clearly, evidence of this kind of transfer is more likely to be found in cumulative and extended records of intercultural talk than in stretches of discourse excerpted opportunistically over the brief periods of intercultural encounter. Although Liu's study cannot get us very far into the substance of intercultural transfer, however, it usefully suggests a broad and deep class of cultural expertise that may be studied appropriately with extended analysis of discourse produced over long stretches of L2/C2 learners' immersion in a host culture.

At the other end of the spectrum of specificity in cultural transfer is Anglin's (1995) focus on how children acquire the words and category labels that encompass their culture's world view during communication with caretakers: "...when a domain is practically useful and culturally significant for a given society, there is often a proliferation of differentiated terminology within that society's language to classify it" (p. 170). My initial speculation about non-didactic group interaction involving individuals of different cultural backgrounds is that the participants will sooner or later signal their inability to understand the use of terms in an L2 that only begin to take on functional significance within the context of attempts to communicate interculturally. This *conceptual transfer* seems the be at the narrow base of C2 learning, is typically (and restrictively) viewed as simply lexical exploration, but appears from my vantage point as some of the bedrock of C2 learning that occurs within the negotiated exchanges that occur between learners from different cultural backgrounds.

This is precisely the perspective that will be elaborated in the study that follows.

3. Participants and Procedures

Twenty-three adult learners participated in the study, conducted during a two-week period of a summer two-

way bilingual intensive program at a community college in Vancouver, British Columbia. Eleven participants were Japanese-as-a-second-language (JSL) learners; the remaining 12 were English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners from a university in Osaka, Japan. There were approximately equal numbers of males and females in each group.

Participants were organised into small (two- to five-member), bilingual groups. The two-way bilingual groups were assigned a common task type for approximately 90 minutes and scattered over several locations such as in classrooms or the cafeteria. Task types included exchanging information about house plans, plotting a route to an event in the city, planning a photo strip story, and making plans for the weekend during the lunch period. Taken together, the tasks and related field trips comprised a schedule of cultural activities during the two-week program. The activities were deliberately intended to mix members of the JSL and ESL groups that had been studying during the morning hours in separate classrooms. The two-way bilingual nature of the tasks (ERIC Clearinghouse and Languages and Linguistics, 1990; Genesee, 1987; Lambert, 1990; Mahrer, 1992; Whalley, 1995) allowed learners to employ either their L1 or L2 to engage their partners.

The task discourse was recorded remotely with up to three FM (wireless) microphones for each group feeding into a common recording device operated with an FM receiver and a battery pack. The battery pack permitted recording groups in remote locations as well as in the classroom. Typically, two microphones would be used for individuals conversing with one or two partners in a given task group. Approximately 12 hours of interaction by task were recorded and about eight hours of this were transcribed and coded in the margin for analysis. Transcriptions were made of all tape segments which included negotiation over a misunderstanding or problem raised by one of the participants in the group which received at least several turns of attention by other members of the group.

4. Findings and analysis

In the following two excerpts, attention is directed to the ">" as the source of a problem interpreted by others in the group as a request for clarification. In both cases, the preceding turn has supplied a problematic focal point, typically in the form of a category name of prominence in the world of the cultural experts in the group, as indicated by ">>". The excerpts are representative of participants' focus on making sense of terms evolved during the discourse that, on the evidence, require considerable cooperative effort in order to unpack their cultural meaning. A frame is drawn around the dialogue sites that appear to supply material of relevance to and in support of this effort. For both excerpts, note that marginal codings are employed to indicate the source (C=Canadian or J=Japanese) and sequence of attempts to extend the circle of meaning for problematic notions. In these excerpts, collocations are numbered to indicate their unique identity in the discourse; when these are recycled or recur, their codes remain the same.

Excerpt 1: Recreational plans - cultural knowledge via lexical exploration, over lunch

1 C3: We should take them to the
2 Commodore on Tuesday night.
3 C1: Disco night.
4 C2: Sneak me in. [laughter]
5 C1: We can sneak you in.
6 C2: [laughter] ++ you guys wanna go
>>7 um + *clubbing*.

Line	Speaker	Utterance	Annotation
>8	J2:	Pa- *pardon me*?	
9	C2:	*Dancing* again?	collocation 1C
10	J2:	Ohhh I like dancing.	+1J
11	C2:	/Wanna go again? + You guys-	
12		oh oh - party animals!	collocation 2C
13	J2:	[laughter]	
14	C2:	Yeah let's go again. Let's go again.	
15	J2:	She *like dancing* too. [laughter]	collocation 1J
16	C2:	/She's very *party*	collocation 2C
17		*animal.*++These guys, man they're all	
18	C3:	You know disco? + You know disco	collocation 3C
19		*music*?+ Umhm, like *disco*?	
29	J2:	Ohhhh. Disco.	+3J
30	J3:	/Ohhhh. Disco.	+3J
31	C2:	/Staying alive, staying alive.	experiential
32	C3:	Yup.	co-referent
33	C2:	[laughter]	
34	C3:	On Tuesday night at th- Tuesday night	
35		at the Commodore -	
36	J1:	Commodore?	
37	C3:	Yeah that's a *night club.*	collocation 4C
38	C2:	The name of the club.Umhm.	
39	J1:	/Night club.	+4J
40	C3:	You have to *dress up disco.*	collocation 5C-3C
41	J1:	Ohhhh. [laughter]	
42	J2:	/Ohhhhh. [laughter]	
43	C3:	Disco! + *Platform shoes.* + Disco, right?	collocation 6C +3C

A number of interesting events are occurring in close sequence. First, two of the three Canadians are able to construct a cultural map of *clubbing* with the close cooperation of the three Japanese participants, all within the space of about 30 seconds. Note this kind of conversationally responsive link to collocations proposed by the Canadians in lines 10, 15, 29 and 30. This is an extraordinarily efficient use of conversational resources involving candidate semantic as well as experiential co-referents that the experts try out on the novices to simultaneously establish a common region of indexical understanding and to build a common structure of meaning. The Japanese responses (in the form of other-expansions and repetition) helps move this process along by offering evidence of attention and comprehension. In addition, collocations are recycled and combined as necessary to reflect the Japanese participants' contingently demonstrated understanding of *clubbing* (e.g., collocation 1C+1J in lines 9 and 10, and collocation 1J and 2C in lines 15-17).

There is no way to tell how much comprehension is actually accumulated by the Japanese learners as opposed to assumed by the Canadians. It may be reasonable to speculate on the point that evidence of misunderstanding or need for clarification is the *typical and preferred* remedy that cultural novices use to make cooperative talk responsive--and to engage experts in supporting their needs. Thus when requests for clarification (">" in the excerpts) drop out of this kind of cooperative talk and are replaced by evidence of learning, it may be useful to look

at these participants at a later date to discover if the novices have in fact acquired some of the conceptual facility of the experts. This superficially jumbled talk thus turns out to contain a small element of C2 knowledge that is communicated in a highly efficient way. (An elementary model illustrating the various processes of this communication is represented in Figure 1, below.)

The next excerpt foregrounds the case of a Canadian learner of JSL offering evidence of miscomprehension and receiving further (but inconclusive) support from her Japanese partners. Here the talk is supported with diagrams of the students' rooms. How the participants clash and attempt to reconcile their understanding of *gomi*, the term under reconstruction, is particularly relevant to the talk. Indeed, the entire excerpt may be interpreted as a *frame for the limits of misunderstanding* that participants can apply to further negotiation of meaning of the sort illustrated in *Excerpt 1.*

Excerpt 2: Defining the region of category inclusivity, supported with room diagrams

Line	Speaker	Utterance	Collocation
1		[It's my room.]	
2	C1:	/Bokuno- heya.	
3		[Really?]	
4	J1:	Eee? [laughter]	
5		/[bedding, bedding ++a desk]	
6	C1:	/Futon, futon, ++ tsukue, (2.0)	
7		[a closet, all kinds of *garbage*.]	
>>8	C1:	Oshiire, iron- ironna *gomi*.	
		[all kinds of GARBAGE!? GARBAGE?]	
>9	J1:	ronna *GOMI*?![emph]. *GOMI*?	
10		[it' s *dirty*.]	
11	J2:	*Kitanai* nanka	collocation 1J
12	J1:	/Gar- ga-	collocation 2J
13	C1:	/Garbage.	collocation 2C
14	C1:	(2.0) Garbage bag. Ahh,	collocation 2C-3C
15		[a bag.]	
16	J1:	Fukuro.	collocation 3J
17		[is this garbage?]	
18	J1:	Ko- kore gomi? Ah, garbage?	collocation 2J
19	C1:	Fukuu, garbage. *Gomi*.	collocation 3C-2C
20	J1:	*/GOMI?*	
21	J1:	Gomi? [laughter]	

These co-participants continue to move around a limited centre of meaning, and to revisit their candidate collocations, without much success in reconstructing a common understanding of *gomi*. Although the source of cultural expertise can and does shift throughout the longer period of total time on task (about 40 minutes), it is the Canadian JSL learner who is now in the position of the cultural novice and who now obtains the attention of his Japanese co-participants. Once the problem is established in lines 8 and 9 to the effect that C1's linking of closets and garbage is somehow faulty (or perhaps intended to be humorous), the work begins. *Gomi* is *kitanai* (dirty), according to J2, and has something to do with garbage, something to be thrown out, according to J1. The cooperation is intense at this point: yes, I know about garbage bags, C1 elaborates, and yes, you can say that in

Japanese, *fukuro*, but no, according to J1, you don't really mean that the contents *of your bedroom closet* contain stuff that is dirty, to be thrown out, worthy of placement together with what you put into garbage bags! By line 19 C1 runs prior collocations (in this conversation) across his own store of referents for *gomi*, but still shows no evidence that he's gone much beyond his initial understanding.

The initial understanding of *gomi*, then, is, like some of the collocations employed in both of the excerpts, a tentative, approximative formulation for C1, namely, anything that sits out of the way, unused and possibly unwanted. This is a very small part of the Japanese sense of the term, but it also includes nuances that have not yet become part of the C1's conceptual knowledge, that is, that *gomi* is dirty, that it ought to be eliminated or is supposed to be thrown out; personal items in one's closet may be worthless or useless (*yakunitatanai mono, iranai mono*) or the closet may even full of junk (*garakuta de ippai*), but these things are not *gomi*.

While the work on *gomi*, seems to have gone nowhere, it has set the stage for further work that may occur in future social encounters among these participants in particular, or with other speakers of Japanese in general who may be dealing with an individual already sensitive to the fact that his foundation for a particular categorical term is not quite right. This is, perhaps, a functional value of one's memory for social experience and the attempt, at least, to engage cultural experts in culture talk. It is also worth recalling that all of this cooperative activity is tacit and accomplished within the non-didactic scaffolding available to all participants who give evidence of their need for understanding.

4.1 A synthesis

Figure 1, below, condenses the excerpted JSL - ESL data from *Excerpt* 1 into a rough model for the tacit methodology of culture learning at the level of conceptual knowledge. *Clubbing* is the specific example within the general framework, i.e., *clubbing* is the category label; *dancing, party animals, disco music*, etc. are the candidate category constituents produced mainly by C1 experts, although C2 novices may produce candidate constituents as well. The first use of *clubbing* (1) creates an occasion to negotiate since the Japanese learners give a clear signal of incomprehension. The ensuing interaction (2) reflects a collective effort by the experts to offer terms (i.e., *category*

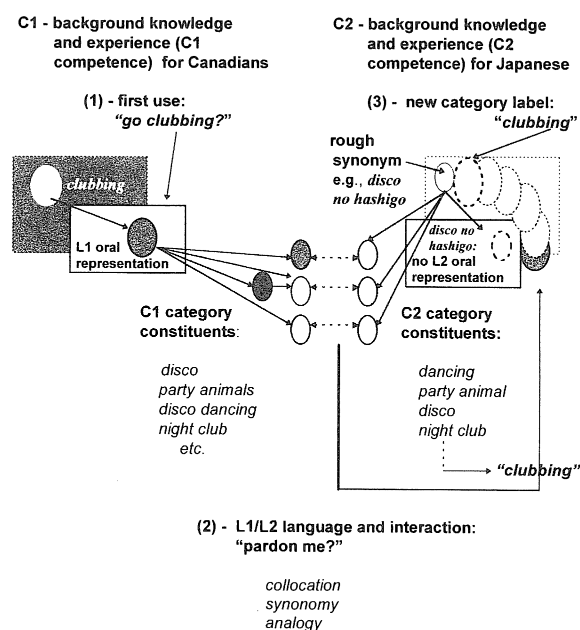

Figure 1. A cross-cultural framework for the negotiation of meaning around category constructs

constituents) through collocation, synonymy and analogy, that they believe will link up with the novices' current state of knowledge; some of these constituents are known by the Japanese learners, others are not, but the overall effect of scaffolding the category constituents is to produce a new category label (3) within the Japanese learners' developing C2/L2 knowledge structure for use in future situations. The internal category that these learners' may have started their analysis with would be a very rough synonym--something on the order of *paati/disco no hashigo* (party/disco hopping, re: *hashigo*, bar hopping), for example, that does not turn out to be a precise fit for the torrent of category constituents scaffolded throughout the developing conversation, but it or other categories represented in the common store of background knowledge and experience among Japanese young people may serve as a kind of gateway for beginning the linkage of various L2 representations for *clubbing* during the talk on task.

5. Summary and Conclusion

I have suggested the constructive, tacit and cooperative nature of intercultural communication--that intercultural communication depends on differences in conceptual understanding to fuel participants' search for contextual meaning and the attempt to reconcile different views of the world. The attempt at reconciliation, supported by participants' attempts to invoke alternative views of a given object through collocation, synonomy and analogy, may or may not be successful in any given stretch of discourse, but it is arguably the bedrock of developing conceptual understanding across cultures. My central point is that conceptual understanding is clearly within the realm of cultural competence: the processes of conceptual transfer--the focus of this paper--are simultaneously supported within and alter in elemental ways the languages that serve as the media of transfer.

I also want to extend my emphasis on the social and interactive nature of culture learning in settings not especially organized to support teaching or instruction of a body of knowledge. As we move further from the lock-step second language classroom to work with learners in group and field settings, it becomes important to understand how it is that social interaction between experts and novices can play such an important role in developing cultural competence. Beyond the input and interaction studies that have been cited above, I would also like to point to the notion of *socially distributed cognition* (see Cicourel, 1987, 1988) – the decentralisation of practical or procedural knowledge and the acquisition of practical competence through multiple, tacit encounters with experts in non-formal settings. Cicourel's work with medical practitioners informs this study by suggesting the importance of bringing many sources of C1/L1 cultural expertise into contact with C2/L2 novices in non-didactic settings. Transcripts in this study show that the social distribution of cognition and the readiness to respond to novices are extraordinarily powerful resource for learning that all participants know how to exploit because of the fact of their membership in a first culture. To put it in other words, diversity is what we are after when begin to think about the ways in which learners acquire cultural expertise through language.

As Fantini (1995: 149) notes, the intersection of language and culture in everyday life may require a "superordinate term that connotes and insures their inseparability", i.e., "[T] the term *linguaculture*...to link the inextricable phenomena of language and culture conceptually and operationally." The operationalisation of linguaculture ought to be a priority for applied linguists. Having taken the leap into an appreciation of the social characteristics of first- and second language acquisition during the 1970's, I believe we now need to elaborate a research base and offer insights in support of second language curricula that actually do treat second language learning as part of the complex web of developing competence in a second culture.

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