"Did I say that?" Contextual influences on oral language task performance

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From the perspective of Sociocultural/Activity theory, this paper provides a brief summary of an investigation into the dialogic negotiation of task-based activity in the foreign language classroom, and its effects on performance in dyadic oral presentations. Students in a Japanese undergraduate English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classroom performed three oral presentation tasks over one academic year. Interaction, performance and reflection data revealed complex influences of cultural and situational factors, in addition to interpersonal and intrapersonal factors, on individual performance. Implications for language teaching research, pedagogy and assessment are considered.

Introduction

This paper reports on findings from a longitudinal study into the relationship between dialogic interaction in context and oral task performance, from the perspective of Sociocultural/Activity theory (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). The overall study investigated ten undergraduate EFL learners as they prepared for and performed three oral performances in dyads over the period of one academic year. The central argument of the paper is that, in addition to individual language or task competence, individual performance in a dyadic task may be influenced by a variety of contextual factors. The paper presents a summary of findings with regard to cultural and situational influences on learner interaction and ensuing task performance. There were also interpersonal factors identified and these are the focus of a future paper. This is followed by a discussion of implications of the study for language learning and assessment in the foreign language classroom.

Sociocultural/Activity theory and task-based language learning and teaching

The "social turn" in second language acquisition (SLA) research (Block, 2003) and language assessment (McNamara & Roever, 2007) represents an argument that individual language development emerges from interaction, and that learners (as agents of their own learning) and social context are influential on the learning process. This perspective can be contrasted with the cognitive processing perspective which often constructs the learner as a passive recipient of language development (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Ellis, 2001), and context as of little relevance (Tarone, 2000). The social turn in SLA is strongly influenced by Vygotskian Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) and, more recently, Activity theory (cf. Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Sociocultural theory in SLA

Vygotsky argues that interaction in its sociocultural context is central to development of psychological processes in children (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). His construct, the zone of proximal development (ZPD) represents the difference between the level of development evident when an individual performs a task alone, and the potential level of development that may be revealed when the task is performed "in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). He further argues that, mediated by the cultural tool of language, this socially-situated collaborative achievement can be internalised by the individual, eventually making potential development actual individual development (ibid.). Lantolf & Appel (1994) point out that this construct is especially important in SLA, where language is both the tool which mediates learning and the object of learning.

Drawing on Vygotskyian theory, Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) employ the term *scaffolding*, to explain processes which occur in the ZPD between experts and novices. They argue that in the context of problem-solving activities, processes such as simplifying the task, controlling frustration and maintaining a focus on the goal of a task, are initially controlled and mediated by the expert, until those aspects of the task can be performed unassisted by the novice. Subsequent first and second language acquisition research has established that learners of similar levels of language or task proficiency are able to provide each other with similar assistance. Donato (1994), for example, used the term *collective scaffolding* to describe the kinds of assistance learners provide each other when working in collaboration.

It has been noted in several studies (Donato, 1988; Brooks & Donato, 1994; Ohta, 2001; Storch, 2002) that the effectiveness of peer interaction is dependent on the emergent, and therefore unpredictable negotiation of such aspects as task control and pedagogic roles. Another construct which has been the focus of much SLA research is that of *intersubjectivity* (cf. Rommetveit, 1985), or the ongoing dialogic process of negotiating partially-shared perspectives and goals related to the unfolding activity learners are engaged in. Intersubjectivity involves both cognitive and socio-affective dimensions of task-based activity (Wells, 1999), and as such is central to an understanding of how effective learners are in task-based interaction and performance.

Task and activity in task-based language learning and teaching

Whereas the cognitive processing perspective mentioned above emphasizes the role of task rubric in eliciting language performance (Coughlan & Duff, 1994), an Activity-theoretic approach is that each instance of a task is different because of differences in the learners (even when the same learners are performing the task) or context (ibid.). Breen (1989) makes the distinction between "task-as-workplan" (p. 188), or the task rubric as presented to the learners, and "task-as-process" (ibid.), or the activity which results after a task rubric is introduced.

Recent work in SLA has drawn on Activity theory to investigate task-based activity. Activity theory (Leontiev, 1981) can be seen as a development and extension of Vygotskian theory (Davydov & Radzikhovskii, 1985; Lantolf, 2000). Such research aims to investigate influences of sociocultural context and learner agency on task-based activity. Storch (2002), for example, highlights how emergent patterns of interaction (e.g., collaborative, expert-novice, dominant-passive) develop between

learners in task based activity, and how these patterns may have variable impacts on task performance and individual language development. In addition, Spence-Brown (2001) argues that learners frame tasks in ways that may be different to those intended by the task designer (e.g., as assessments, opportunities for interaction and/or opportunities for learning; cf. Goffman, 1974 for an explication of the construct of framing).

The study

The current study was undertaken in the Faculty of Humanities, School of English and Cultures of a university in Japan. The *Oral Presentation* class aimed to develop learners' oral presentation task-related and language-related skills, and met once a week for the entire academic year (25 weeks over two semesters). The study's participants included 12 learners (ten male and two female; ages ranging from 19 to 33). Most learners' English language proficiency fell within the intermediate range which the class was designed for (TOEFL 450-480) with the exception of two learners; one whose proficiency was below this range and one above.

Interaction, performance, reflection and observation data were collected for analysis. Data relating to the relationship between interaction and performance were analysed in two stages. First, interaction data were coded according to the emergent cognitive focus of learners, defined as *activity-frames*. These interaction data were quantified to provide an overall perspective on where learners expended their efforts. Using the activity framework and quantitative analyses, eight cases were qualitatively analysed (four from the first presentation and four from the last) to investigate the relationship between context, learner agency and task performance.

The task

For the first oral presentation, students were asked to prepare a ten-minute presentation on the biography of an American, Canadian or English person. The presentation was done in dyads, with partners chosen by the learners in a previous pedagogic task. Each learner was asked to share the preparation and presentation time equally. Visual information was to be in the form of pictures and a timeline. Preparation time was three weeks, though the presentation was to be rehearsed in front of a peer-group after two weeks. Marking criteria focused on content, structure and paralinguistic features of the performance. These were made available to the learners at the beginning of the course, and had been used by the learners in a previous pedagogic task. Later presentations involved more learner autonomy with regard to topic choice, style of presentation and use of visual data. They were also progressively longer, with the final presentation being from 15 to 20 minutes duration.

Summary of findings

In addition to influences of interpersonal and intrapersonal features of the activity, the study found contextual influences which interacted in unpredictable and often idiosyncratic ways, and the dialogic negotiation of activity had distinct influences on task performance for each dyad. Individual factors which were found to impact on task-based activity and performance included actual and perceived language and task proficiency, familiarity with the task and individual preference, interpretation and framing of the task and resulting activity. Contextual influences focused on in the study included cultural and situational features of the interaction. The treatment of

these separately in the following section, it should be noted, is for the purpose of illustration only, and masks the emergent interaction between the different contextual features. After outlining influences on interaction, a summary of findings regarding the effects of interaction on performance is presented.

Contextual influences on task-based interaction and performance

Cultural influences

The main influence of culture on interaction between learners in dyads in the current study related to the learners' use of Japanese pragmatic moves and codeswitching. It has been argued that Japanese society is collectivistic or consensus-oriented (e.g., Augsburger, 1992), where individual agency is subordinate to the concerns of the group (Matsumoto, 2002). Although this view is simplistic, and it is more likely that there are various mixes of individualism and collectivism in any society, there are pragmatic moves in Japanese interaction that highlight the importance of group decision-making and a concern for the interlocutor's "face".

A focus on group decision-making was evident when learners negotiated a topic for their presentations. Learners almost invariably spent a great deal of time and effort ensuring that their partners were involved in the decision-making process and were happy with the decisions being made. There were several cases in the data where learners appeared to reach agreement on a topic, then explored other topic areas, in cycles that involved intricate pragmatic moves to ensure both members were involved in the final decision in a non-face-threatening way.

Linguistic differences between English and Japanese were also identified as influencing both interaction and performance. In addition to issues related to pronunciation and word order, other issues involved differences in the use of the passive voice, the construction of relative clauses, and the use of English loan words in Japanese.

Although it is difficult to make direct links between the cultural context and performance on the task, it appears that the cultural requirement for learners to negotiate face in such an extensive way may have reduced the amount of time they had to collaborate in preparing for their oral presentations. For example, in their interaction for their first oral presentation learners spent 40% of their time focusing on procedural aspects of their preparation (including topic negotiation and logistics), 44% creating and negotiating content, 3% negotiating their actual performance (including structure and delivery), and 8% of their time off-task. The strong focus on procedure can largely be attributed to the time spent by the learners painstakingly negotiating a mutually-acceptable topic.

Situational influences

The influence of situational factors on interaction and performance was varied and idiosyncratic. Situational influences also ranged in scope from those external to the classroom (e.g., changes in part-time employment) which influenced an individual's engagement with the class and task-based activity the classroom to emergent factors related to an individual or dyad's experience of the class or task. One example which highlights situational influences relates to the negotiation and fulfilment of individual roles.

As part of their task-based interaction, learners negotiated individual research roles, which were to be performed outside class and would the basis of the following week's in-class interaction. Where one learner did not complete the promised research, this had variable impacts on the following week's interaction. Where learners had developed and were able to sustain relatively stable and collaborative patterns of interpersonal framing of the activity (see below), this had little effect on their progress towards task goals, but where learners' interpersonal activity was variable, the perceived failure of one learner to do promised research had the potential to change the interaction in a critical, and in this case, negative way.

Whether or not emergent or situated factors have the potential to result in critical events which can change the course of interaction, appears to be related to a dyad's ability to form relatively stable and collaborative interaction patterns (Storch, 2002), allowing them to remain focused on task-based goals.

Discussion

Learners in the dyads in the study were found to influence each other's contribution to task-based interaction in terms of their ongoing framing of the activity and task performance. Dialogic activity-framing was also found to be influenced in complex and unpredictable ways by aspects of the context (including cultural background and specific situational features) as well as interpersonal and intrapersonal features.

Spence-Brown (2001) found that individual task-framing was more influential than the task rubric in determining task-based activity. This was supported in the current study, but it was also extended by the investigation of the dialogic perspective, where findings showed that individual perspectives were negotiated, along with task control, intersubjectivity and pedagogic roles.

The study also drew on Storch's (2002) finding that learners in dyads may establish somewhat stable patterns of interaction, which may influence learning in positive or negative ways. In addition to supporting Storch's findings that collaborative patterns of interaction resulted in more learning opportunities (in terms of linguistic development), the current study found that interpersonal activity-framing could be highly variable and idiosyncratic, both within dyads over time and across dyads. In addition, although some dyads did appear to form relatively stable interaction patterns, critical events, which had the potential to substantially affect both dialogic interaction and performance, also occurred within the data.

Implications of this research for the task-based language classroom relate to the roles of the task rubric, learner perception and dialogic framing of task-based activity. With regard to the task rubric, the findings of this and previous studies suggest that some negotiation between the perspectives of task designers, teachers, assessors and learners may be required for learners to construct an approach to the task which can maximise success as defined by all stakeholders. In addition, learners may need support to develop task-related skills and to raise their awareness of procedural, time-management and interpersonal strategies which may contribute to successful task performance. The fact that learner focus may be directed towards any aspect of the discourse may be ignored in task-based language research, which often seeks to make direct links between the task rubric and language performance.

The methodology of the current study has implications for task-based language research and assessment, in that it was only by retrospective triangulation of

transcripts, performance and learner reflections that the effects of dialogic framing were discovered. In the classroom, Storch (2002) suggests that a teacher may intervene or reconfigure dyads if learners appear to be interacting in non-collaborative ways. The complexity of the data in this study meant that it would be extremely difficult for a teacher to recognise the interpersonal framing of such activity, or to ascertain whether a stable pattern had been formed. An alternative strategy may be to raise teachers' and learners' awareness of the potential effects of patterns and events which may affect interaction, and suggest strategies which may lead to successful interaction and performance.

Although the focus of the overall study was mainly on the relationship between task-based interaction and subsequent task performance, the fact that there were several influences other than the task rubric on individual performance within a dyadic task has implications for language testing. Indeed, although dyadic oral presentations are not currently used for the purpose of testing language proficiency, the popularity of paired assessment tasks is growing (Lazerton & Davis, 2008). The main implications of the study with regard to language assessment relate to authenticity and interlocutor effect (cf. Lazerton & Davis, 2008). Van Lier (1996) distinguishes between personal and institutional perspectives in achievement assessment. In the current assessment task, personal achievement relates to personal and interpersonal framing of the task rubric, resulting activity and performance, whereas the institutional perspective relates to the objective measurement of that performance. Spence-Brown's (2001) finding that individual framing was not necessarily authentic was supported in the current study. In addition, the finding that individual achievement or competence was one of several factors influencing task performance, suggests a challenge to the validity of task performance as the sole form of assessment (cf. also Spence-Brown, 2001). The difficulty here is that resources and time are required to increase such validity, or at least to identify threats to authenticity of the task in its implementation. Finally, the emergence of research into the social dimension of language testing (e.g., Lazerton & Davis, 2008; McNamara & Roever, 2006) links the sociocultural perspective that learning emerges from contextualised interaction with a perspective in assessment that task performance is a complex sociocognitive phenomenon.

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