Social Actions for Classroom Language Learning

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John Hellermann

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Preface and Acknowledgements

The research in this book reflects a convergence of two long-standing interests of mine: language learning and the organization of social interaction. Classrooms represent a unique opportunity to see the intersection of these two interests. The technological capacities of the corpus of data I've had to work with (the Multimedia Adult English Learner Corpus, Reder, 2005) allow for focused investigations of learner–learner interaction in and around language learning tasks. This corpus of classroom video recorded interaction that includes six camera views of each classroom is allow researchers and practitioners new insights into what learning looks like in the classroom.

The research in this book has tried to take advantage of this unique perspective on the classroom by providing micro-level details in the descriptions of social actions that occur between and among learners, actions that classroom teachers (and many researchers) have not been able to see. I hope that these descriptions and analyses will help teachers and researchers (re)consider what we consider to be processes of language learning and the value of face-to-face interaction in that learning. Many of the ideas in this book were influenced by the research done with the Project on Academic Language Socialization at the University of Wisconsin (Zuengler *et al.,* 1998) and the discussions I had with members of that project, particularly, Jane Zuengler, KimMarie Cole, Elizabeth Miller and Ceci Ford. The ideas in the paper also owe much to discussions with Simona Pekarek Doehler, Johannes Wagner, Gabi Kasper and Joan Kelly Hall.

I would like to thank participants in conversation analysis data sessions that took place at Portland State and where many of these ideas were first presented: Dominique Brillanceau, Eunyoung Cho, Luis Perea, as well as Elizabeth Cole and Sarah Albers who helped with translations. I would like to thank the teachers who participated in the data collection, management team members Reuel Kurzet and Sandra Banke, and the support in the data collection and processing from large team of graduate

and undergraduate students. Major funding for the project came from the U.S. Department of Education through the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). Additional financial support was provided by Dr Cornelia Wagner.

The research reported on in this volume would not have been possible without the vision of Stephen Reder and Kathryn Harris, the researchers responsible for the establishment of the National Labsite for Adult ESOL at Portland State University (Reder *et al.,* 2003). Their wide-ranging understanding of the factors involved in adult language learning showed them the need for methods and processes for data collection and dissemination that are unprecedented in the field. The video excerpts available via web links in this book only begin to illustrate this innovation. The Multimedia Adult English Learner Corpus and research from this corpus has attracted the attention of a number of scholars interested in researching classroom language learning from socio-cultural perspectives and has significantly added to the theoretical developments in the area of second language learning. Together with NCSALL's director, John Comings, Steve and Kathy allowed the research in this volume to develop without restrictions and persistently asked the questions that helped keep this conversation analysis researcher's eyes on the bigger picture.

Chapter 1

Additional Language Learning in a Classroom Community of Practice

Why This Book Now?

Many potential readers picking up this volume will surely know the rich body of scholarship in the area of classroom discourse, (Cazden, 1988; Cole & Zuengler, 2007; Erickson, 1996; Green & Wallat, 1981; Hester & Francis, 2000; Mehan, 1979; Newman *et al*., 1989; Nystrand, 1997; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Wells, 1999; among others) and may wonder why they might read yet another study of classroom discourse. Many of those same potential readers will also know that the bulk of the research on classrooms has focused on interaction between the classroom teacher and students. This research has made invaluable contributions to understanding the discourse structures of teacher-led classroom interaction and the relationships between language, teaching and learning. However, because of its focus on the teacher-student cohort interactions (but see Fisher, 1993, 1994; Markee, 2000; Ohta, 2001a, 2001b; among others), this research has not been able to show the turn-by-turn detail of students' interactions with one another and with the subject matter content nor how these interactions lead to learning over time. The lack of focus on learner-learner interaction and development over time has been, for the most part, because of technological limitations.

The vision behind the National Labsite for Adult ESOL (Reder *et al*., 2003) led technical innovations that allowed for the collection of almost four thousand hours of video recordings of adult ESOL classroom interaction. While some (including the researchers leading the projects) questioned the efficacy of such a massive data collection project (four consecutive years), the rewards are becoming evident as the research findings become public (Brillanceau, 2005; Harris, 2005; Hellermann, 2005b, 2007; Reder, 2005).

The philosophy behind the massive data collection is part of the foundation for the perspective on research and classroom language learning that is taken in this book. Extensive data collection enables a broad and deep empirical vision of a process (learning in a classroom) that occurs through the social interaction of a number of individuals who come together as a collective, mutually goal-oriented enterprise: the Classroom Community of Practice. It is as part of this physical co-presence and the trajectory toward common goals that learning takes place in a classroom. Extensive, long-term data collection through video recordings has allowed researchers to gain insight into both the micro-processes of language development and longer term changes to understand language learning as it happens as part of a community of practice in the classroom.

The availability of a 'full picture' of the breadth and depth of interaction in the classroom has enabled researchers and practitioners to develop a new 'professional vision' (Goodwin, 1994) on the nature of classroom teaching and learning. We have found that practitioners and researchers who see the learning process as it occurs in the classroom, in detail and over time, tend to focus less on what the teacher is doing, less on teaching and learning as a transmission process (Heap, 1985). This richer vision has allowed us to reconsider learning in the classroom as co-constructing knowledge through interaction, 'to be discovered together by the group of human resources in the classroom [and] reflexively constitutive of what indeed is found' (Macbeth, 2003: 258). These opportunities for seeing classrooms anew have enabled empirical studies of the social and situated part of cognition in language learning that has begun in other social scientific disciplines (Cole, 1996; Goodwin, 1995; Hutchins, 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Resnick *et al*., 1991).

The research reported on in this book takes advantage of new developments in data collection in classrooms (Reder *et al*., 2003; and described later in this chapter). With this book, I was interested in investigating the ways that particular social actions in adult language learning classrooms, actions that have not been accessible to researchers in the past, are sites for the micro-level practices of language learning and interaction in classroom communities of practice (Lave, 1988, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wortham, 2001). These actions are hybrid areas of talk-in-interaction in which practices for organizing face-to-face interaction through language also organize what we think of as the institutional talk of language-learning tasks.

More specifically, using methods for close analysis of language in interaction from Conversation Analysis (CA), the analytic chapters (3, 4 and 5) will focus on the social practices that adult learners of English use to

organize their interactions during dyadic language-learning tasks. The chapters each focus on one area of the task interactions: Chapter 3 on the starts of the tasks, Chapter 4 on non-elicited story tellings that occur during the tasks and Chapter 5 on the talk used to organize the students disengagements from their tasks. The rich perspective on interaction in the classroom afforded by the video technology of the data collection (six cameras) allows for the analysis of micro-level language practices as they occur within a classroom community of practice. With the focus of two of these cameras on two pairs of learners engaged in dyadic interaction in each classroom collected over four years, I will address language learning from both microgenetic (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004; Siegler & Crowley, 1991) and longitudinal perspectives.

Traditional Research on Additional Language Learning

The phrase 'additional language learning' is used deliberately to contrast this study of the social practices involved in language development of the adult immigrant learners with a long history of research in the field known as second language acquisition (SLA). The research program of SLA has focused on the acquisition of an abstract grammatical system in learners' second or other language and the linguistic, social, and cognitive factors that influence that acquisition. The field developed in the later half of the 20th century as researchers became interested in using knowledge from linguistics to improve language instruction (Lado, 1957) and was greatly influenced by cognitive psychology and structural linguistics from its inception in the 1950s. These influences include Chomskian formal linguistics (Flynn & O'Neill, 1988; Gass & Schachter, 1989; White, 1985, 1989; and others) and Labovian sociolinguistics on variation within SLA (Bayley & Preston, 1996; Preston, 1996; Tarone, 1988; Young, 1991). The major impact of structural linguistics and cognitive psychology on studies of second language learning can be seen in the catalog of SLA research through current studies (see compendia by Doughty & Long, 2003; Ritchie & Bhatia, 1996). The impact of linguistics and cognitive psychology on SLA has been to concentrate study on additional language learning as the development of a second language formal grammar and the processing of that grammatical system as accomplished by the individual mind-brain. The object of this line of study has often been decontextualized linguistic structures and the subject of quantitative studies (Lazaraton, 2003).

The linguistic and cognitive foci for research on additional language learning is important as basic research to construct formal models of linguistic systems and on the possible organization of those systems in the

brain. Applied researchers, however, have started to see the overall research program in the field of SLA as focusing too narrowly on the abstract grammatical systems of learners to the detriment of our understanding of language use and communication by learners of additional languages (Firth, 1996; Firth & Wagner, 1997, 2007; Toohey, 2000; Wagner, 1996).

There have been lines of research in SLA that acknowledge the importance of language as it occurs in interaction between humans (particularly the perspective now known as 'input and interaction' or 'interactionist'). This research (Gass & Varonis, 1985; Hardy & Moore, 2004; Long, 1983, 1996; Varonis & Gass, 1985; and others) has been interested in how the adjustments that learners make in their speech that results from overt prompts from interlocutors in interaction might lead to second language acquisition. However, while the input–interactionist research used expert–learner and learner–learner interactions as a way to collect the data for their studies, the focus of this research has been an individualist, cognitive orientation of learners' acquisition of an individual linguistic competence that results from interaction and not on the social aspects of the interaction in its own right (Seedhouse, 2005; van Lier, 2000).

Socio-Cultural Perspectives on Language Learning

More fully contextualized studies of the social aspects language learning include studies grounded in Vygotskian Sociocultural theory (Brooks & Donato, 1994; Donato, 1994, 2000, 2004; Frawley & Lantolf, 1985; Hall, 1993, 1995, 1997a, 2004; Lantolf, 2000a; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Ohta, 2000, 2001a; Platt & Brooks, 2002; Vine, 2003; and others), language socialization (Bayley & Schecter, 2003; Kramsch, 2002; Poole, 1990, 1992; van Lier, 2002; Watson-Gegeo, 2004; Willett, 1995) and ethnomethodological conversation analysis (Brouwer & Wagner, 2004; Hellermann, 2007; Markee, 2000; Markee & Kasper, 2004; Mondada & Pekarek Doehler, 2004; Seedhouse, 2004, 2005).

An exchange initiated by Firth and Wagner in the Modern Language Journal (Firth & Wagner, 1997, 2007) first motivated by a call for limiting the number of research perspectives and theories for SLA (Long, 1993) had the effect of encouraging much of this more socially-contextualized research and has given cause for socio-cultural researchers on second language learning to consider to what degree their studies should be considered part of the field known as SLA (Firth, 2007). Some of the criticisms around Firth & Wagner's call for a wider range of research perspectives in SLA suggested that some contextually-focused research (particularly that

influenced by conversation analysis) may be valid research but was not research on language 'acquisition' (Gass, 1998; Kasper, 1997).[1]

Although terminological differences such as what is the meaning of 'SLA', in and of themselves, are not particularly important for knowledge production,[2] I raise this particular terminological difference in order to frame my discussion of the theoretical background to this study of additional language learning. The perspective on language and language learning taken in this book sees language as a cognitive and cultural artifact, something that humans have because of our living with and through language. From this perspective, language competence is synonymous with language use and language acquisition is both influenced by and influences the contexts of its use (Goodwin, 1995). Research on language acquisition/learning can gain a great deal of insight from research perspectives that focus on learners, learning and the social actions that language is used to accomplish. With the focus of such a research program on the reflexive contextualization process between language and language use, we can gain new holistic and ecological insight into language and language learning (Kramsch, 2002; Toohey, 2000).

Language competence or membership

Recent work by applied linguists and language learning researchers has been interested in understanding language learning and assessing competence by examining learners' ability to use the language being learned for social practices, often, in real-world contexts. From this perspective, a learner's goal or target for study might be considered some degree of interactional rather than purely grammatical competence (Cekaite, 2007; Cicourel, 1974; Hall, 1993, 1995; Hellermann, 2006; Kanagy, 1999; Kramsch, 1986; Markee, 2000; Young, 1999, 2000, 2002; Young & Miller, 2004). Interactional competence might best be described as the capacity for using language appropriately, for particular routines in particular contexts which might then be relevant for interaction in other equivalent contexts. Such competence does not preclude attention to linguistic form. Rather, assessment of interactional competence in a language focuses on the situationally and interactionally appropriate use of linguistic forms in language use in interaction (McNamara & Roever, 2006).

Given the theoretical perspective on language, learning, and interaction taken in this book (ethnomethodological conversation analysis, see Chapter 2), assessing learners' competence in English will focus on how learners display their various statuses as members of two overlapping

communities: the classroom community of practice and the community of English language users. Members using language in social interaction always display a variety of competences for language in social interaction thus (re)defining themselves as members (Heritage, 1984a). We are 'members' of the community of 'English language users' to some degree because we use English. The interaction of focus in this research, an English language classroom, is a context where 'classroom' and the 'English language user' communities overlap. Tracing the development of learners' competence in English in this classroom context will be done by observing video recordings of language routines or discursive practices (Hanks, 1996; Tracy, 2002) that are repeated within a particular class period and over time in equivalent contexts (Brown *et al.*, 1989; Peters & Boggs, 1986). With data focusing on learner dyadic interaction in the moment and over time, change in such practices and change in learners' membership statuses can be observed both as moment-to-moment process and as long-term development.

Community of practice or situated learning theory

From a CA perspective, language use displays our status as members as we use our members' methods to interpret our talk. Membership in and learning through a community of practice is focused on goal-directed action, action that includes talk. Understanding learning within a community of practice came out of anthropological research on learning in a variety of contexts where learning occurred but was not considered the sole focus of the participants in those contexts (Liberian tailors, recovering alcoholics, insurance claims processors, etc.) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Learning was investigated as it occurred outside of classrooms as part of the socialization into work and society (see also Rogoff, 1990; Scribner & Cole, 1973). Lave and Wenger's theory was proposed and developed as an alternative to a bifurcated understanding of learning. This division would place context-dependent, informal or 'primitive' (Mead, 1943) learning that occurs outside of formal learning contexts on one side and abstract, pan-contextual learning that purportedly occurs in most formal educational settings on the other. The theory suggests that even learning that is usually considered as the collection of abstract, decontextualized conceptual knowledge (learning in formal educational institutions) is mediated by social factors within a community of practice (Lave, 1996). In community of practice theory, learners are active participants in both the shaping of the objects and processes of learning. The interactional dynamic of the situation is seen not just as a conduit for

learning but as a stimulus to and raw material for learning. The active aspect of participants in interaction in situated learning theory focuses on participation as a socio-interactive (Mondada & Pekarek Doehler, 2004) indicator of learning.

From this perspective, learning is facilitated by interaction using language practices within a community of practice and can be seen as individuals' changing patterns of participation in the use of those social practices within the community of practice. A community of practice is a group of individuals, usually physically co-present, who come together under the auspices of a common interest or goal and co-construct practices for the interaction that, in turn, constitute the community of practice – their reason for coming together. While some intention in the organizational plan for the community of practice is needed (Wenger *et al*., 2002), learning occurs in the co-construction of the practices that maintain the community of practice without any overt planning or curriculum. A common example of a community of practice is the workplace. People come together for the common goal of getting some work done and in the process of getting the work done, develop practices for getting that work done that are not overtly instructed and are, to some degree, unique to their own group. In doing this, they model, collaborate with, and mentor one another the practices for getting that work done. Learning, in this situated, community of practice sense, is a process of becoming (McDermott, 1993; Wenger, 1998; Wootton, 1997) rather than a product to be measured against some absolute standard of knowledge.

In the community of practice, learning and knowledge creation is dynamic and shared. For language learning, this means that, while the code necessary for using a language is limited (if not finite), the manifestations of the language for use in various contexts are potentially limitless. Conceptualizing language learning as it occurs within a classroom community of practice shifts the focus for the study of language learning away from the limited structures of the code itself to the contextualized and more open-ended encoding of language as communication.

Language learning classrooms in communities of practice: Some previous research

While community of practice theory has continued to serve as a basis for research on learning in settings outside the classroom (Hutchins, 1995; Wenger *et al*., 2002) recently it has also served as a framework for research on studies of learning in classroom contexts (Bucholtz, 1999; Leki, 2001; Morita, 2004; Norton, 2001; Toohey, 1996, 2000; Zuengler & Miller, 2007.