

Developing Interactional Competence in a Japanese Study Abroad Context

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The photo on the front cover was taken at Chidorigafuchi, a popular cherry blossom viewing spot in Japan. It was taken a few days after I arrived in Tokyo to begin my fellowship term. When the sight of cherry trees and boats caught my eyes, I remember quickly capturing this photo. Feverish anticipation of starting a new project in a new place still remains in my heart as brightly as the cherry blossoms in the picture. I hope to share some of the excitement throughout this book.

Sincerely,
Naoko Taguchi
February, 2015
Pittsburgh, PA
USA

1 Interactional Competence in a Japanese Study Abroad Context: An Introduction

The ability to interact appropriately and effectively in a second language is critical to both the product and process of second language acquisition. Being able to create and sustain cooperation in conversation, as well as to understand others' views and build on shared knowledge, are some of the most fundamental goals and outcomes of second language (L2) learning. This conversational interaction serves a prominent role in assisting L2 learning. When learners are engaged in meaningful, spontaneous, and active dialogues, they use whatever resources they have – linguistic, semiotic, and dialogic – in collaboration with their peers to communicate meaning, and the byproduct of this process is the development of their interactional competence.

This book reports on a study that investigates the development of interactional competence in a Japanese study abroad context. Traditional models of communicative competence consider language ability to exist within individuals as a stable trait (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010; Canale & Swain, 1980). In contrast, interactional competence views language ability as a dialogic construct, locally situated and jointly constructed by participants in discourse (Hall *et al.*, 2011; Young, 2011; Young & He, 1998). Interactional competence considers participants' skillful use of a variety of linguistic and interactional resources at the task of joint meaning creation. Adapting this theoretical framework, this book illustrates the development of interactional competence as it manifests in peer-to-peer dialogues.

By adopting the framework of interactional competence, this study distances from the cognitivist approaches to SLA that view L2 learning as an individual matter. Instead, it takes a socio-cognitive approach, which suggests that L2 learning occurs through participation in social practices. Social practices here refer to recurring incidents of social interaction that structure our social realities. For example, greeting and leave-taking, ordering meals, discussing homework, and making plans for the weekend are all mundane social activities that occur in an everyday school context. Successful interaction in these contexts

depends on participants' knowledge of conventions of the practices – what courses of action are expected in a specific practice, and what linguistic and non-linguistic resources are employed to construct the practice.

However, successful interaction does not result solely from individual participants' knowledge of conventions or their ability to format their linguistic and non-linguistic actions according to the conventions. It is a matter of collaborative efforts of all participants working toward the construction of shared understanding. During interaction, participants constantly monitor and regulate their contributions to the talk. When their knowledge of conventions does not align with the course of discourse, their interactional competence helps readapt their linguistic actions corresponding to the ongoing discourse. Other participants respond to this shift through acknowledgment and alignment, which is also a reflection of interactional competence. Hence, learning L2 means learning to act collaboratively with others to accomplish social actions in talk.

Following this framework, my study takes the view of language competence as a dialogical construct. I present a micro-level analysis of L2 Japanese learners' interaction with their peers. Moving away from traditional analysis of linguistic forms in isolation, my study focuses on how learners use linguistic resources in interaction to accomplish mutual understanding. A casual conversation with peers is a routine social practice, yet it presupposes intricate layers of linguistic and interactional conventions. In a Japanese conversation, learners need to know which speech style to use (plain or polite) to index social meaning of solidarity or distance. At the same time, they must understand how to mark boundaries of talk by shifting between different speech styles. They also need to know how to skilfully use incomplete sentence endings (a common feature of spoken Japanese) to involve their interlocutors to talk-in-progress and promote reciprocity. These are all critical linguistic and interactional resources that learners have to attain in order to become expert conversationalists in Japanese. By analysing these resources in peer-to-peer conversations, I will document features of interactional competence specific to Japanese language. In addition to the conversation analysis, interview data will be analyzed to reveal the nature of learners' social practices in their study abroad program. Because interactional competence develops through participation in recurring social practices, analysis of interview data will define connection among language use, language development, and context of learning.

Participants included 18 learners of Japanese enrolled in a Japanese language program at a private university in Tokyo. Learners' conversations were recorded twice during a 15-week semester. They were paired randomly and instructed to have an informal conversation for 20 minutes. The conversations were transcribed and analyzed based on Young's (2008a) interactional resources. Interviews were conducted individually with a subset of eight participants three times during the semester. The interview data were

cross-examined with the conversation data to reveal different patterns of development corresponding to individuals' different social experiences.

This book has three unique features. First, the study provides a configuration of linguistic and interactional resources as they are found in Japanese. The book effectively describes what it means to be interactionally competent in Japanese by explicating what linguistic and interactional resources enable participants to construct and orient to social actions in Japanese. Second, the book not only describes changes in learners' interactional competence but also interprets these changes by complementing conversation data with interview data. A triangulated analysis of multiple data sets generates meaningful interpretations of individual variations in interactional development, and the learner-specific and contextual factors that shaped developmental trajectories. Finally, this book contributes to our understanding of contextualized SLA and study abroad learning. Study abroad programs have been claimed as a site for L2 learning, but very few studies have analysed interactional competence in relation to learners' study abroad experiences. This book offers insights about the types of learning resources available in a study abroad context and how those resources assist learners' development toward a competent speaker in the target community.

In the remaining chapter, I will first discuss the theoretical framework of interactional competence and review existing studies. Then I will introduce Japanese speech styles (the plain and polite forms) and incomplete sentence endings as primary linguistic resources through which interactional competence can be examined.

Interactional Competence: Definition and Historical Sketch

Interactional competence (Hall, 1993, 1995; Hall *et al.*, 2011; Young & He, 1998; Young, 2002, 2008a, 2008b, 2011) has gained attention as a critical aspect of becoming a competent speaker in the target language. While the framework of interactional competence is recent, its basis goes back to the 1970s in Dell Hymes' work (Hymes, 1972). Challenging the Chomskian view of language as a system of grammar, Hymes argues that knowledge of language entails both grammatical knowledge and sociocultural knowledge. He coined the term, *communicative competence*, which refers to the ability to use language accurately and appropriately in social context.

Hymes' idea became the basis for the L2 communicative competence models emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010; Canale & Swain, 1980). Canale and Swain's (1980) model was a forerunner of this trend, which maintained that successful communication involves efficient integration of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies. Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer

(1996, 2010) advanced Canale and Swain's model by providing a more elaborate classification of components of communicative competence. In Bachman and Palmer (1996, 2010), language knowledge refers to both organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. Organizational knowledge deals with formal aspects of language (grammar and textual aspects), whereas pragmatic knowledge concerns language use in relation to language users and language use settings. Pragmatic knowledge is further sub-divided into functional knowledge, which enables us to interpret the relationships between utterances and the communicative goals of language users, and sociolinguistic knowledge, which enables us to interpret or create utterances that are appropriate to specific language use settings. A characteristic of these early models is that they view communicative competence as a psycholinguistic ability that exists within individuals as a stable trait, independent from context. In this view, language ability belongs to an individual who employs the ability, and it is stable across social contexts and interactional settings.

Since the 1990s, language competence has been incorporated into a broader conceptual framework that focuses on the dynamic and dialogic aspects of communication. Most notable in this trend is the emergence of the model of interactional competence (e.g. Hall, 1993, 1995; Hall *et al.*, 2011; Young & He, 1998; Young, 2002, 2008a, 2011). Drawing on Hymes' (1972) model of ethnography of speaking, Hall (1993, 1995) underscored the importance of analysing 'socioculturally-conventionalized configurations of face-to-face interaction by which and within which group members communicate' (Hall, 1993: 146). Young (2002) later elaborated on Hall's framework by proposing six components as analytical layers: (1) knowledge of rhetorical script (i.e. knowledge of how conversation is sequenced and structured); (2) knowledge of register; (3) turn-taking ability; (4) topic management skill; (5) knowledge of patterns of participation specific to a given practice; and (6) devices for signalling discourse boundaries (e.g. shifting across different speech acts).

These components are not totally in contrast with early models of communicative competence (Hall & Doehler, 2011). Knowledge of rhetorical script corresponds to the concept of discourse competence. Knowledge of register and participation patterns specific to context, and use of boundary-signalling devices reflect sociolinguistics and pragmatics considerations. However, the fundamental difference is that interactional competence rejects the view that these components are independent from each other and from social context, residing in individuals. Instead, interactional competence views these components as working in unison in a face-to-face interaction and shared among participants in interaction. Hence, an individual's ability is no longer viewed as a fixed or stable trait: it varies in correspondence with co-participants' performance. Interactional competence views language knowledge and ability as locally situated and jointly constructed by all participants in discourse. Ability and context are connected. Participants' resources are not set in advance but

are dependent on the specifics of a dynamic social context. See Young's (2008a: 101) definition of interactional competence:

Interactional competence is a relationship between the participants' employment of linguistic and interactional resources and the contexts in which they are employed; the resources that interactional competence highlights are those of identity, language, and interaction. . . Interactional competence, however, is not the ability of an individual to employ those resources in any and every social interaction; rather, interactional competence is how those resources are employed mutually and reciprocally by all participants in a particular discursive practice. This means that interactional competence is not the knowledge or the possession of an individual person, but it is co-constructed by all participants in a discursive practice, and interactional competence varies with the practice and with the participants.

This conceptualization finds a synergy with Hall and Doehler's (2011) definition of interactional competence. They conceptualize interaction as a goal-oriented and context-specific activity that draws on a range of participants' resources, both linguistic and non-linguistic, for the task of co-construction of meaning:

IC [interactional competence] includes knowledge of social-context-specific communicative events or activity types, their typical goals and trajectories of actions by which the goals are realized and the conventional behaviors by which participant roles and role relationships are accomplished. Also included is the ability to deploy and to recognize context-specific patterns by which turns are taken, actions are organized, and practices are ordered. And it includes the prosodic, linguistic, sequential and nonverbal resources conventionally used for producing and interpreting turns and actions, to construct them so that they are recognizable for others, and to repair problems in maintaining shared understanding of the interactional work we and our interlocutors are accomplishing together. (Hall & Doehler, 2011: 1–2)

These definitions indicate that interactional competence conceives of language knowledge and ability shared between participants in context. It manifests in the participants' ability to design one's contribution in such a way that it responds appropriately to co-participants' previous utterances and actions. To make an appropriate contribution, one needs to understand the specifics of interaction – goals, activity types, participants' roles, and conventions of speech. At the same time, one needs to be sensitive to the sequential organization of discourse so they can align their actions to the unfolding discourse and adapt dynamically moment-by-moment. Moreover, one must continually monitor the 'direction' of ongoing talk, and revise one's

understanding of preceding contribution in accordance by predicting the consequences of certain moves and actions. Hence, participants' skillful co-construction of discourse draws on their knowledge of the conventions of a given practice. And critically, these resources are shared among participants.

Participants' resources are closely related to the concept of *discursive practices*. Borrowing Tracy's (2002) term, Young (2008a: 69) defines discursive practices as 'talk activities that people do.' The structure of a practice involves 'what actions you perform, the forms of language that you use, and also gesture, eye gaze, and ways of positioning the body – how close you stand to the person you are talking to' (Young, 2008a: 58). The verbal, nonverbal, and interactional resources that participants employ to construct meaning are configured into discursive practices. Understanding discursive practices is important in SLA because L2 learning takes place within discursive practices. What is learned in the practices is interactional competence – the ability to interact effectively with others. Young (2008b) attests:

discursive practice is an approach in which language learning is viewed not only as the changing linguistic knowledge of individual learners but also primarily as learners' changing participation in discursive practices: What is learned is not the language but the practice. (p. 138)

Under this approach, learning manifests in our changing engagement in discursive practices. We learn by participating in context-specific discursive practices. Development of interactional competence is a byproduct of this participation process.

A growing body of recent studies has applied the 'learning-as-participation' perspective to the study of interactions among L2 learners and their language development (e.g. Dings, 2014; Hellermann, 2008, 2009, 2011; M. Ishida, 2009; Markee, 2008; Masuda, 2010; Nguyen, 2011a, 2011b; Rine & Hall, 2011; Yagi, 2007; Young & Miller, 2004). Drawing on the framework of situated learning, Nguyen (2011a) documented how a learner of English used interactional resources to participate in a talk with a native speaker of English. Analysis of interactional moves between the learner and her ESL teacher revealed that at the beginning of the semester the learner's responses to the teacher's topic proffers were brief, containing simple turn construction units and non-verbal signals such as nodding and smiling. However in the later period, the learner started to produce multi-unit responses, expanding it into longer, more syntactically and lexically elaborate turn construction units. Nguyen interpreted this learner's change from a perspective of learning-as-participation. Opportunities for learning were provided by the topics nominated by the teacher, which allowed the learner to respond to the topic with expanded answers.

On the topic of situated learning, Hellermann (2011) analyzed the interactional practice of 'other-initiated repair' performed by two ESL learners in

a classroom. Analysis of over 300 examples of repair sequences revealed the focal participants' change in their use of language in repair. When correcting a peer, these learners developed abilities in three areas: isolating the problem word from a longer utterance, repeating the problem word, and supporting their correction when it was not immediately taken up by their peers. In addition, there was a marked change in the learners' orientation toward different trouble sources for repair. The learners initially focused on lexical problems as repairable items, but later their orientation changed to include a broader subject, such as discourse structure and course of action for repair initiation. They also developed the ability to use a wider repertoire of methods for making other-initiated repair.

What is common in these studies is that learning is conceptualized as participation in discursive practices. L2 development is viewed as the change in ways of participating in situated practices. Participation involves the maneuvering of a collection of linguistic and interactional resources – how to manage topics, when to take turns and transfer speakership, and how to design turns in a way that they fit to the ongoing flow of conversation (Young, 2008a). These linguistic and interactional resources directly index learners' interactional competence – ability to work together with their co-participants to co-construct interactional activities.

Although these two studies are notable, longitudinal research that revealed changing patterns of talk-in-interaction is still relatively rare. A challenge of longitudinal research was pointed out by Hall and Doehler (2011) who asked: 'What are the relevant units of analysis (actions, practices, methods, linguistic items, etc.) that allow documenting change in IC [interactional competence] across time, and warrant comparability between interactional conduct at two different moments?' (p. 7)

My study responds to this question by collecting longitudinal, interactional data of L2 learners of Japanese across two comparable tasks and documenting evidence of change in their interactional practices. This study will describe Japanese-specific linguistic and interactional resources that enable participants to construct social actions in Japanese. My analyses will present both individual- and group-level change. I will illustrate what changed or did not change over time within the group, while showing individual-level data to highlight the patterns of change. At the same time, I intend to explain the changes by supplementing information about individual learners' participation in the local community gleaned from the interview data.

Resources for Discursive Practices

Interactional competence draws on a variety of resources that participants bring to the joint construction of discourse. These resources include knowledge of rhetorical scripts, lexis and syntax specific to the practice, the

turn-taking system, topic management, repair, and recognition and production of boundaries between speech activities (e.g. Hall, 1993; Young, 2002, 2008a, 2008b, 2011). Young (2008a, 2008b) specifies three categories of resources: *identity*, *linguistic*, and *interactional*. *Identity resources* refer to *participant framework*, which includes participants' identities or their 'footing' (Goffman, 1979). The identity resources refer to the relative positioning of participants with respect to each other (e.g. role and status), which help us understand the social organization of the participants. Participants sometimes change their footing within a single interaction to signal a different position. This change is indexed both verbally and non-verbally.

Linguistic resources, on the other hand, refer to linguistic forms specific to activity, place, and purpose of interaction. Linguistic features such as grammatical forms, vocabulary, and pronunciation characterize a specific register for the practice. For example, certain forms and lexis co-occur frequently in a professor-student advising session and index the practice of academic advising (e.g. vocabulary such as *course nomination* and *pre-requisite*, and grammatical forms used for typical speech acts such as suggestions and refusals). While these forms are associated with specific practices, they are not pre-determined. They change in response to the specifics of context such as participants' previous experience, history of interaction, and degree of involvement in the ongoing talk. Interactional competence involves one's ability to use linguistic resources specific to practice, but it also involves one's flexibility in adjusting the use of resources corresponding to changing context.

Similar to linguistic resources, *interactional resources* also define a discursive practice. While linguistic resources focus on formal aspects of language, interactional resources attend to the ways in which participants create meaning in a collaborative manner. Interactional resources are necessary in the process of joint meaning construction, because only by successfully using these can participants display their understanding of organization of actions and their contributions to interaction. Young (2008a) presents four categories of interactional resources: *speech acts*, which involve sequential organization of a communicative act; the *turn-taking* system in which participants manage transfer of speakership; *repair* in which participants solve a communication problem; and *boundaries* in which participants distinguish the current practice from adjacent practice. Below is a summary of three types of resources (Young, 2008a: 71):

- Identity resources
 - *Participation framework*: the identities of participants in an interaction; participation framework; positioning of participants.
- Linguistic resources
 - *Register*: the features of pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax that characterize a practice.