Use of English as a Resource for Language Learning during Collaborative Group Work
- Exchanging perspectives on linguistics issues

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Abstract

This paper studies the use of English as a medium of communication during the collaborative interaction of learners of Japanese at a tertiary institution. The study identified that English played an important role in exchanging perspectives on linguistic issues during problem-solving and promotes the construction of meaning and knowledge of the TL that is eventually internalised by individuals. It also promotes deeper conceptual learning through learners’ “languageing”.

1. Introduction

Language classrooms in Australian universities have become more multilingual in recent years. This is because an increase in the number of international students as well as students who were born outside of Australia, but were brought up in Australia because their parents have migrated to the country. These factors have contributed to an increasing diversity of students in language classrooms and as a result, they have brought a unique aspect to Australian classrooms – learners do not share the same first language. Although English is a common language in Australia, it may be a student’s second or third language. English is, however, the only language that makes learners’ communication possible in diverse classrooms.

This paper examines the use of learners’ most proficient language - English - during collaborative group work within the framework of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. The qualitative analysis of the data identified several important roles that English plays in language learning, however, this paper focuses on how English was used to exchange learners’ views on linguistic issues and how it contributed to their language learning.

2. Previous Studies

Sociocultural Theory and SLA

Language as a tool for communication in language classrooms has attracted attention since language teachers adopted activities that require interactions amongst learners. The applications of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (1978) have brought different perspectives in
language teaching and learning (e.g., Brooks & Donato, 1994; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Ohta, 1995, 2000; Swain, 2000, 2006). The theory claims that language is an important tool for learning and learning occurs in a social context. This fundamental idea of learning has opened a new avenue for research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) by showing how particular types of student interaction in the classroom can facilitate language learning. This approach to learning has motivated many researchers to investigate peer or group work and advocate for its deployment in classrooms (e.g., Ohta, 1995, 2000; Pica, Kanagy & Falodun, 1993; Swain, 2000). As a result of such work, language classrooms have changed from teacher-centred to student-centred and pair or group work activities have been introduced. Students have more opportunities to solve problems by themselves in order to accomplish the assigned task. This means that they need to exchange knowledge with each other in order to be able to fill any knowledge gaps. This change has also allowed students to have more autonomous learning opportunities. As a result, learners require effective communication amongst themselves in order to complete the assigned tasks on their own.

Role of L1

Antón and DiCamilla (1998) conducted a detailed investigation of learners’ dialogue and L1 use during collaborative interaction and found that the use of L1 is beneficial for language learning. The study has identified three important functions of L1: construction of scaffolded help; the establishment of intersubjectivity; and the use of private speech which regulates learners’ own mental activity. They concluded that ‘L1 use provides, through collaborative dialogue, an opportunity for L2 acquisition to take place’ (p. 328) and suggested that the L1 should be considered as one of the many cognitive tools used for learning. Other studies that investigated learners’ L1 use during their interaction also found that L1 plays an important role in language learning (e.g., De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1998, 2000; Ohta, 2001; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003).

Although their findings shed light on the use of L1 during collaborative interaction, there has been very little empirical study done on the use of learners’ shared language in multilingual contemporary classrooms.

Languaging

In Vygotsky’s (1978) framework, all learning is firstly a social process. That is, we learn as a result of interaction with other individuals through meaningful exchange of ideas, concepts and actions (Guerrero Nieto, 2007; Sengupta, 2001). Learners assist each other to construct meaning and knowledge through interaction, and meaning and knowledge are eventually internalised by individuals (Vygotsky, 1978). Exchanging ideas during interactions involves verbalising learners’ inner thoughts externally, which is a type of what Swain (2006) calls ‘languaging’. Based on the view of learning in sociocultural theory, Swain and Swain et al. (2009) argue that languaging is important in the learning process because it transforms inner thoughts to external knowing (externalization) and, conversely, it transforms external knowing into internal cognitive activity (internalization) (Swain et al., 2009, p. 5). Swain et al. suggest that the learning process through languaging is as follows:

By externalizing their thoughts (i.e., by using language to mediate their cognitive processes), students came to understand what they did and did not know, what information they had to seek out to complete their understanding, and what inferences they needed to make to have a coherent conceptual understanding. (Swain et al., 2009, p. 21)

Thus, languaging allows students to develop a sense of their understanding of concepts and to use this sense as a basis to further their conceptual learning. Conceptual learning is the basis of development in the Vygotskian framework. It provides deeper understanding and becomes the starting point for its application (Swain et al., 2009). In relation to conceptual learning, Brooks et al., (2010) studied how languaging mediates between scientific and
spontaneous concepts using Vygotsky's (1986) distinction between scientific and everyday (spontaneous) concepts. In the analysis of their study, they found that learners were able to make connections between their existing everyday concepts and their emerging scientific concepts of voice in French and to reshape their existing language knowledge and concepts through languaging. In language learning, everyday concepts are viewed as learning the first language which is acquired unconsciously without volition, attention or analysis. On the other hand, second language acquisition is equivalent to learning scientific concepts, which need to be acquired consciously and strategically. Acquisition of a second language often uses learners existing knowledge of their first language (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1986). The study by Brooks et al. (2010) suggests that languaging, the language use during interaction, facilitates conceptual learning.

The study builds on these studies and investigates the language practices of language learners who do not share an L1, but who do have high levels of ability in a common language that they use as a lingua franca in language learning.

3. The study

The subjects

The data to be analysed in this study was students' dialogues during their group work. The students were studying Japanese language as a foreign language in a third-year course at a tertiary level. The group consists of four members, P, D, H and S. Their details are described in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial</th>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>In-country experience in Japan</th>
<th>Previous formal language study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>Both parents are Taiwanese. Came to Australia at the age of 12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3 weeks on a high school trip</td>
<td>5 years at high school and 1 year at university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>Came to Australia as an international student.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2 short visits (7-14 days each trip)</td>
<td>3 years at high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Australian parents</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3 weeks on a high school trip</td>
<td>4 years at primary, 5 years at high school and 1 year at university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Both parents are Turkish. Came to Australia at the age of 12.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1 short visit (21 days) and 11 months as an exchange student at university.</td>
<td>2 years at university</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Participants
The Task

The group was required to make up a drama story on a given situation. The overall performance needed to be about 20 minutes long and was to be performed in front of their peers. The situation was:

A boyfriend and girlfriend are about to go to Japan. One is Australian and the other is Japanese. They discuss their fears about going to Japan to meet the parents. On arrival in Japan, they meet the parents and discuss future plans. You will need to consider the type of language each person will use with one another.

The task was given at the beginning of the semester and students formed a group on their own. The group then worked on the task outside of the classroom. The criteria for this particular assessment were fluency and naturalness, accuracy, range of expression, content and overall performance. Students were encouraged to include any cultural knowledge they had in their task.

The method

Each session was recorded on a digital audio recording device located close to the students. Students were asked to turn the device on and off when they started and finished their meeting. The data was then transcribed by the researcher with the assistance of a native speaker of English as English was a second language for the researcher and there were unclear sections to transcribe for a non-native English speaker.

4. The use of English in assessing linguistic aspects of L2

In the following excerpt, the students are discussing the very first scene of their drama performance. They are making a story centred around a Japanese girl, Hanako, who lives in Australia, and her non-Japanese boyfriend, Bob Builder. The scenario indicates that they have already been living together for some time and that Bob does all the housework.

Excerpt 1:

1:P .... Nani o shite iru no? I'm just making dinner.
2:S Oh, that can be a little bit sarcastic, so I'm gonna say...Nani o shite ieba ryori o tsukuruno yo, da yo.
3:P It sounds a bit weird, don't you think?
4:S It does a bit, doesn't it? If you are asking what I'm doing...
5:P I thought that meant....
6:S Cooking dinner.
7:P I thought that meant, ah, while we are on the topic...
8:S Umm, actually....
9:P I'm doing this. (showing a draft scenario written on her notebook)
10:S Yeah, that works quite well actually. Can we be doing this?
11:P But Japanese, I don't know, but Japanese sounds really off.
12:S No. Ok.
13:P I don't know. I don't think we should...
14:S Can you do ah... I wonder if you can say 'sore ni shite wa'. Considering it's late.
Sore ni shite...

15:P  Sore ni shite wa?

16:S  No, you can't do that either. Shita bakari... Oh, I can use 'shita bakari'. Ryori o shita bakari desu.

17:P  Are we... is it up to Topic 6? The words.

18:S  Un.

19:P  We are. I just wondered where that expression is from.

20:S  I just use that one. I just made dinner. Ryori o tsukutta bakari.

21:P  Ah. Ok. I thought you are making dinner. If you say that, you just finished making dinner.

22:S  That means you can just eat now......it fits in, I think. Because it doesn't change the conversation.

23:P  Yeah, you can say ima... Let's just say we just finished cooking dinner.

In line 1, P provides the first line for Hanako in the TL the meaning of which is, 'what are you doing?' and Bob's answer to the question is in English. In his response, S suggests that Bob's answer should be slightly sarcastic, and gives an alternative in the TL trying to use an expression tte ieba which means 'speaking of'. It appears that when S saw this expression and its meaning in the textbook, he thought that by using this expression, he could add a sarcastic nuance to the original dialogue. He then made the sentence in the TL, which was not quite correct, perhaps because he was actually thinking in English and therefore, the sentence he made in the TL was a direct translation from English. In line 3, P evaluates the structure of the sentence including this expression and makes a judgment that it is not quite right. P's utterance gives a chance for S to rethink the sentence he has made, and S develops and agrees with P's assessment in line 3. S then clarifies the meaning of the sentence he created in English to see if it conveys the same meaning as the sentence he made in the TL. Even though S originally considered the sentence was not appropriate, it appears that he believes that the sentence does convey the meaning that the group decided in their previous meetings, judging from his utterances in line 6, 8 and 10. P, in contrast, continues to argue that there is a problem with S's sentence in lines 5, 7 and 9, and finally in lines 11 and 13 she clearly states that the sentence does not sit well in that context. P's opinion leads S to explore the possibilities of using other expressions for this scene as seen in lines 14 and 16 by looking for alternative expressions in the textbook. He evaluates each expression using its English meaning to see if he could use it in any way even if the meaning of the sentence differs somewhat from what the group originally intended. After evaluating alternatives, S proposes an alternative shita bakari meaning 'just finished doing', and makes a sentence with this expression in the TL, which changes the meaning of the original sentence completely. In line 20, S clarifies the meaning of the new sentence in English and further modifies the structure of the sentence in the TL so that it is grammatically correct. S's clarification of the meaning helps P to resolve her misunderstanding of this sentence, and she confirms her understanding of what S was saying. In line 22, S again evaluates whether or not the sentence fits into the scenario and explains his judgment. In response, P resolves this discussion with the suggestion of adding a word, ima meaning 'just now', to the sentence.

This episode illustrates that English can play several roles during collaborative group work. Firstly, the students use English as a resource for accessing the meaning of each expression, which enables them to adapt the expression to the dialogue they are working on. Sharing the meaning of the expression in English allows the students to create sentences using that particular expression. By using English, the students are able to make
sense of the form or meaning of a text in the TL, as has been found in previous studies (e.g., Brooks & Donato, 1994; Donato, 1994). It can also be said that English assists the students in accessing L2 forms and evaluating and understanding the meaning of a text in L2, as Antón and Di Camilla (1998) have also identified in their study. Although English plays a positive role in accessing and evaluating forms, as seen in the example above, the use of English may also cause problems as the TL structures may be affected when the students translate the sentence from English directly to the TL. Secondly, English is used as a resource for the students to evaluate the sentences they have created and to explain their judgment of the sentences in order to develop a shared understanding and consensus. Once the students have created a sentence, they can use English to discuss it to see if it conveys the meaning that they intended and to exchange opinions about the sentence. Moreover, the students use English when they propose alternatives during the discussion about the sentence.

The next excerpt was recorded when the students were discussing Hanako’s mother’s dialogue. In the storyline, Hanako’s mother asks Bob what he does as an occupation and he answers that he is a part-time carpenter. Hanako’s mother is not satisfied with his answer and asks again what other jobs he does. The script the group created in English was ‘what other jobs do you do, Bob?’ and P suggested that Bob’s response to the question should be something funny such as he does washing and cleaning for Hanako. H agreed and suggested it would be even funnier to make Bob misinterpret Hanako’s mother’s question and simply state what he does on a day-to-day basis rather than what he officially does for a living. In order to achieve this, the students had to come up with a Japanese phrase that conveys the same meaning as the English script they created, but which also carries a certain degree of ambiguity so that it can be misinterpreted.

Excerpt 2:

1:P  In that way, that means we translate the Mum’s sentence... we have to make sure we say it so that it is misinterpreted.

2:S  What about you, Mum? Got any ideas?

3:D  ‘Hontou? Hokani wa nani no... nan no shigoto o suruno kana?’

4:P  So if you say shigoto... Do you know his work?

5:D  ‘Nani o suruno kana... hokani wa nani o suruno kana?’

6:H  Ah, what other things do you do?

7:D  Hokani wa...

8:P  Ah, maybe you want to use ‘can you?’

9:D  Ah, ‘hokani wa nani o dekiruno kana?’

10:P  Yeah, ‘what other things’, then you have... like what else can he do and ... He is trying to impress the family.

In line 1, P frames the problem to the group that they need to translate the English line, ‘what other jobs do you do’ into Japanese that makes Bob misinterpret the question and therefore give a humorous answer. D in line 3 suggests a possible line that is a direct translation of the original script using the word shigoto, meaning ‘job, occupation’. P, in the next line, evaluates the translated line and raises a possible problem of using the word shigoto; that is, if they use it, the answer has to be specific to official jobs and it will therefore not cause misunderstanding and achieve what they intend. P’s question seems to lead D to realise the problem with her first translation and she suggests another possible translation that uses suru, meaning ‘do’ instead of shigoto. By not using the job-specifying word shigoto’, the sentence is able to carry ambiguity and can result in Bob’s rather unexpected and humorous answer. H in line 6 formulates and expresses how she understands the
Japanese line by referring to its English translation. P in line 8 then suggests changing the word further from ‘do you do’ to ‘can you do’, and D in line 9 proposes another possible line in Japanese meaning ‘what other things can you do?’ In line 10, P accepts the line and states the reasons by referring to its English translation. At the same time, she indicates that the line they produced in Japanese is ambiguous enough that it allows Bob to give a funny answer, such as he can do all sorts of housework, in order to show his enthusiasm and impress Hanako’s family.

This excerpt is a good example of collaborative problem solving facilitated through the use of English. It illustrates how English is used while students are trying to translate their English script into Japanese. As seen in the above example, they used English to both confirm meaning and justify an alternative suggestion, which allowed them to successfully convey the ambiguity they were seeking in Japanese. They also used English to evaluate the appropriateness of the sentence in that context. In addition, the use of English allowed them to collaboratively resolve the problem of how to translate English script into Japanese with the same ambiguity as English.

The next excerpt is another example of collaborative problem solving amongst students and how English assisted them in resolving the problem they encountered.

**Excerpt 3:**

1:H Then we can do interrogation. ‘How old are you, Bob? What is your occupation, Bob?’ Are you gonna take care of my daughter, Bob?’

2:P Ok. Should we say ‘He is a carpenter from Australia’ or ‘He is an Australian and he is a carpenter’?

3:D *Oosutoraria jin.*

4:S ‘He is an Australian and he is a carpenter’ because in Japanese it is very difficult to say the two together.

5:D Australian carpenter?

7:S Australian carpenter. Oh.

8:D&S Daiku. *Oosutoraria no daiku?*

In line 1, H suggests the list of questions that Hanako’s mother should ask Bob in English and P attempts to provide a line in response to one of those questions. Here, she formulates a problem, that is, there are two patterns describing Bob and she is not sure which one is more appropriate. D in line 3 provides a word, *Oosutoraria jin* meaning ‘Australian (person)’ implying to the group that she supports the latter pattern of Bob’s description. S further supports D’s idea with his justification using his knowledge about the Japanese language. In line 5, D then proposes an alternative in English and S seems to have just noticed this way of describing Bob and to be happy with the alternative. In line 8, D and S both translate the expression, ‘Australian carpenter’ into the TL and the problem is resolved.

This excerpt also showed how the students solved the problem collaboratively and English played a facilitating role in order to create the correct dialogue for the script. They used English to confirm the meaning of the dialogue they had already created so that everyone in the group was able to share the same idea on the storyline. Then they produced a new line in English while considering how they could translate it into the TL. At the same time, they used their grammatical knowledge of the TL, which is in this case the difference in sentence structure between English and Japanese. When they created the line in English, they seemed to be thinking of the same Japanese sentence simultaneously. The students appeared to be all aware of the difference and S especially verbalised the rule to the group.
Then D made a suggestion that was easily translated and conveyed what they tried to say and they were able to create an appropriate sentence. Therefore, it can be said that English allowed them to analyse the sentence structure both in English and the TL and to enhance the grammatical awareness in the TL.

5. Discussion

The concept of languaging uses the idea from sociocultural theory that language is a cognitive tool (Vygotsky, 1986). Language used during interaction is important for learning. In the excerpts analysed above, the students used mostly English when it came to exchanging their ideas or views in order to solve problems. This is because the concepts of Japanese grammar or fine details of culture are too difficult for the students to explain in the TL and English, that is, their most proficient language, is the only tool that can mediate awareness and understanding of these concepts. It is by enabling such mediation that use of English contributes to exchanging perspectives and ultimately learning the second language.

Excerpt 1 and excerpt 2 both illustrate how the students exchanged their perspectives in the process of problem-solving and how they used English as a tool to externalise their views and, moreover, used their existing knowledge of English forms to construct a sentence in the TL. Excerpt 3 is another example of how the students exchanged their views in order to solve a problem. In this example, they identified the difference in sentence structure between English and Japanese and successfully expressed how they intended to translate the dialogue written in English. To be specific, student P framed a problem for the group about how Bob, an Australian boy in their script, should be described ("he is a carpenter from Australia or he is an Australian and he is a carpenter?"). This is a subtle difference of the language structure between Japanese and English. While P made this utterance in English, she seems that she was thinking of the Japanese sentence at the same time and comparing two sentences in both languages. In other words, she attempted to connect everyday and scientific concepts. Then she externalised her inner thought that, as a result, ended up forming a question to the group. D then gave her an idea by providing the word for ‘Australian’ as a person (Oosutoraria jin), implying that the group should use the latter pattern. Student S endorsed D’s idea with his existing knowledge about Japanese grammar ("he is an Australian and he is a carpenter because in Japanese it is very difficult to say the two together"). However, student D suggested another alternative with which was easily translated and carried the meaning of what the group wanted to express in Japanese ("Australian carpenter?"). The group finally succeeded in making a Japanese phrase meaning ‘Australian carpenter’ in Japanese (Oosutoraria no daiku). In this example, the students verbalised their views – they could be forming a question, analysing alternatives or expressing existing knowledge to external, and exchanging their views, they were able to overcome the problem. Moreover, in the process of constructing the sentence, their thinking went back and forth between Japanese and English. This means that the group was trying to connect the language forms they knew (spontaneous concepts) and the forms of the emerging language (scientific concepts) in order to make an appropriate decision.

6. Conclusion

Exchanging perspectives on linguistic issues during problem-solving promotes constructing meaning and knowledge of the TL that is eventually internalised by individuals. It also involves languaging that mediates learners making their inner thoughts external and this promotes deeper conceptual learning. Such conceptual learning can provide a strong basis for the application of knowledge in real world contexts (Swain et al., 2009). English is an essential tool for these students in exchanging perspectives. It allows students to exchange their views and ideas freely and externalise their inner thoughts and contribute to socially constructed learning as a result.
References


The transition to online learning in French and back again: a collection of online resources useful for French teaching through COVID-19 and beyond

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Erin Peters is a 7th year teacher, currently working at Wynnum SHS as the Languages Coordinator and teacher of Years 7, 11 and 12 French (and one Year 11 Essential Maths class). She believes that all students should be given an opportunity to explore and create in a fun and stimulating, yet challenging environment. She is passionate about incorporating games into learning and allowing students to express themselves in their own way, whilst preparing them for real-world experiences of Language. She is also a firm believer in sharing and am recognisant and extremely grateful for all those who consistently put their hands up to help out and share their knowledge.

When I first heard about the Coronavirus, it seemed far away, only slightly scary and definitely hyped up by the media … little did I know just how much it would impact teaching and learning around the world for such an extended period of time. At the time of writing, UNESCO estimates that 61% of enrolled learners worldwide are affected by school closures caused by COVID-19 (UNESCO, 2020). As a French teacher in Queensland, I was not prepared to completely revamp my teaching to cater for learners who were online at home, online but still at school, offline and at home, or any combination of the above (and of course with varied definitions of “home” on top of this). My pedagogical approach generally involves technology in some form; however, I was not at all equipped for the challenges that lay ahead. I tend to encourage frequent participation in my classes and am okay with a noisier classroom than, say, your typical English or Maths class. It was a shock therefore to find myself speaking into the digital abyss on Blackboard Collaborate and wondering if any of my students were even listening, let alone mentally prepared to participate in lessons and absorb important content. I found myself trying a number of new things, using resources suggested by others and researching new pedagogical approaches. Some were successful, some not so much. When speaking to the