

Understanding EFL Learners' Interactions in Group Discussions Using the Interactional Sociolinguistic Approach

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Abstract: In the present study, the interactional sociolinguistic approach was employed to analyze EFL learners' interaction in group discussions. Two groups of learners participated in the present study: one from a higher level and the other from a lower level class. Their discussions were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Immediately after their discussions, the participants were interviewed. During the interview, stimulated recall method was used to prompt the learners to recall their thoughts they had while they were discussing in groups. The results indicated that higher level learners effectively presumed what their interlocutors knew and selected appropriate lexical items, while lower level learners may not have been able to choose appropriate language due to their lack of lexical knowledge and lack of skills to presume what interlocutors knew. Also the findings showed that listeners' use of top-down processing using schema when interpreting the speaker's intended messages was crucial in successful communication. Therefore, learners should develop their skills to use schema to communicate both as speakers and listeners.

Keywords: *discourse analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, shared knowledge*

Introduction

Discourse analysis can take several different approaches to observing, describing, and analyzing language samples. Among such approaches are speech acts theory, conversation analysis, political discourse analysis, and interactional sociolinguistics to name a few. Just like in Stubbe, Lane, Hilder, Vine, Vine, Marra, Holmes, and Weatherall's (2003) study where they analyzed a single spoken discourse using five different approaches—conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, politeness theory, critical discourse analysis, and discursive psychology—it might be ideal to employ multiple approaches to discourse analysis in order to better understand the discourse thoroughly. At the same time, a single approach may be taken depending on the purpose of the study, and any approach is not better than the others. When an approach is chosen, what it purports to analyze must be taken into consideration.

According to Schiffrin (1994, 1996), the interactional sociolinguistic approach focuses on a concern with interpretations of interactive language including prosody and intonation by different participants in communication. More specifically, when speakers

make an utterance, there is always an intended meaning, and to convey this intended meaning, speakers make decisions regarding which specific linguistic forms and suprasegmental features to use, such as intonation and pitch. This decision depends on how much linguistic, social, and cultural knowledge the speakers and listeners share. The same principle applies to listeners as well. However, listeners interpret speakers' utterances in different ways depending on the extent to which they share linguistic, social, and cultural knowledge with each other (Gumperz, 1996, 2001)

To illustrate what interactional sociolinguistics can offer to discourse analysis, Gumperz (2001) shows two brief extracts from job interview data where the interviewer asks basically the same question, but the interviewees respond differently depending on how they interpreted the interviewer's questions (p. 220). For example, when the interviewer asked if the interviewees had seen the workshops, the electrician with a South Asian background responded in one word "Yes," whereas the bricklayer from the local region elaborated on his answer to the question, specifically giving his impression of the workshops. Gumperz's claim is that while the interviewer expects the interviewees to elaborate their responses to some extent because that is commonly practiced in job interviews in western culture, the South Asian electrician's responses are minimal because his culture does not require him to dwell on his personal preferences in this situation. As the example shows, interactional sociolinguistics provides information about how linguistic choices formed based on the participants' linguistic and cultural backgrounds may cause difficulties in achieving their communication goals.

Similarly, there is successful and unsuccessful communication among EFL learners in group discussions due to the appropriate and inappropriate linguistic choices based on their shared knowledge. In particular, the less knowledge the learners share, the greater difficulties they encounter in communication. In the present study, the interactional sociolinguistic approach was employed for an analysis in order to observe how learners choose lexical items based on what they believe they share between interlocutors in group discussions.

Method

Participants

A total of eight freshmen enrolled in two English Discussion Classes at a private Japanese university in Tokyo participated in the present study. Since the objectives of the English Discussion Class are to teach discussion and communication skills, there are no grammar segments in this class. It is also important to note that all students in the English Discussion Class must speak English only. The first group (Group H) consisted of four Japanese students from one of the highest level English classes based on a standardized test called GTEC developed by Benesse Inc. and Berlitz International (Benesse n.d.). These students majored in Intercultural Communication. The students in Group H entered university through the taking of an entrance examination which included English

reading and listening tests. The second group (Group L) included four students from one of the lowest level English classes based on the same test. They majored in Business, and one of the four students was a foreign student from Korea. The students in Group L entered the university through a recommendation system which does not require any English test but contains an interview test in Japanese. The seven Japanese students were eighteen to nineteen years old, and the Korean student was twenty-three years old when the research was conducted.

Data Collection

There were two sets of data. The first set consisted of speech samples taken from two group discussions by two different groups. The length of the discussion was sixteen minutes. Their discussions were audio recorded using an IC recorder. The audio recordings were then transcribed by the researcher, and a native speaker of English read each transcript as he listened to the recording to see if there were any discrepancies between what was audio recorded and what was transcribed. There were eight cases of disagreements in terms of what the students said. Five of the cases were resolved after a brief discussion between the researcher and the native speaker, and the other three cases were excluded from this analysis because an agreement could not be reached. The first eight-minute segment of each discussion was analyzed for this study.

In addition to the audio recordings, field notes were taken by the researcher to note any unusual episodes such as unnaturally prolonged pauses and silences, excessive gestures, and other paralingual expressions during the group discussions. Directly after the group discussion, the researcher and students discussed unclear utterances, communication breakdowns, and episodes of miscommunication based on the field notes. In this session, a stimulated recall method was used because it was one of many effective ways to recall the students' thoughts (Gass & Mackey, 2009). The stimulated recall method using audio recordings was effective especially in prompting the learners to recall their intended messages and intentions of their utterances and reactions. These sessions were not recorded, but the researcher took elaborate notes on events such as what the intended meaning of an utterance was in a communication breakdown, and how students interpreted the other members' utterances when miscommunication occurred. The sessions were held in Japanese, which is the first language of seven participants. The Korean student was highly proficient in Japanese.

Analysis

An interactional sociolinguistic approach was employed in the present study to analyze two group discussions by two different groups of participants. Several episodes from each group discussion were chosen for analysis. The analysis was based on the transcripts, field notes taken during the discussions, and interview notes taken during the group interview immediately after the discussions.

For the interactional sociolinguistic analysis, several episodes illustrating how the

learners in both Groups L and H chose language depending on the level of participants' shared language and cultural knowledge were chosen with particular attention to the learners' use of lexical items and suprasegmentals. The factors that determined successful communication and caused communication breakdowns were analyzed in detail.

Results

Members in Group H seemed to interact with one another taking shared knowledge, experience, and language into consideration more carefully than those in Group L. Those in Group H appeared to consider what knowledge and experience they shared with the other members when choosing the language to express their opinions. Those in Group L also seemed to consider to what extent their listeners would share the knowledge, but due to the limited linguistic competence, they seemed to encounter difficulties with choosing expressions. Instead, listeners in Group L seemed to develop strategies to use schema to comprehend the speaker's intended message. Although participants in both groups used examples to illustrate their opinions, the choice of the examples themselves and the language they used to give their examples seemed to be slightly different from each other.

There is a communication breakdown caused by different levels of shared knowledge between a speaker and his listener in the following excerpt taken from the discussion by Group L.

- 1 Shun: =do you want to back uh do you want to back to the okinawa ah the future in the future?
- 2 Mako: oh (2.0) future is okinawa (1.0) okinawa is city okina- (2.0) okina- big o-okinawa (2.0) naha-naha city
- 3 Shun: naha city?
- 4 Mako: in big
- 5 Hana: AH naha city
- 6 Mako: okinawa in big
- 7 Shun: okinawa
- 8 (3.0)

Before this exchange, Shun said "it so young people is young people is living in the city is good because can meet many people for example okinawa, yokohama, sapporo." This utterance indicates that he knew Okinawa. Moreover, he knew that Mako was from Okinawa since he made eye contact and pointed at Mako when he said "Okinawa," and in the post-discussion interview, he revealed that he knew that Okinawa was Mako's hometown. Immediately before the excerpt, Mako talked about the advantages of living in the country, using his hometown to illustrate how people there lead a good life. Shun asked if Mako would want to return there (line 1). Mako was probably unsure about

whether Shun knew Naha because he first tried to avoid using the name “Naha.” He instead tried to explain that he would like to live in a big city in Okinawa, but he failed to communicate his message. As Mako predicted, Shun asked what Naha city was (line 3). These two learners’ lack of shared knowledge about Naha as well as Mako’s lack of lexical and syntactical knowledge hindered the communication between these learners, although Hana obviously knew Naha city (line 5).

Another interesting event occurs in the same group when Shun talks about convenience as an important factor when deciding where to live (line 9). Shun first seems to struggle with the language, pondering how to support his idea of convenience. After a long pause, when he comes up with convenience stores as an example, he starts with a loud exclamation “uh” followed by “for example” (line 16). Following that utterance, he continues and actually says “convenient store” (line 18) but further explains what he does in the convenience store. When he says “twelve hour” meaning midnight, Hana and Sono seem to understand what he means. However, Sono paraphrases “twelve hour” as “every time open” which suggests her interpretation was “open twenty four hours” rather than “at midnight” (line 21). Based on the interview notes, Shun did mean “midnight” by “twelve hour” as it is a common mistake caused by a direct translation of the Japanese “juni (twelve) ji (o’clock or hour).” Although “twelve hour” was a semantically incorrect choice, the learners’ shared knowledge about translation in their first language helped the speaker and listeners communicate effectively.

- 9 Shun: yes_in my opinion, i thi:nk (0.2) most important is (1.0) convenient
 10 Hana: [hmm]
 11 Sono: [hmm] why do you think so.
 12 Shun: because (0.5) because (2.0) not convenient i: eh (2.0) i cannot (1.0) be:: (???) (2.0) i cannot be i want to i cannot be i want to (2.0) think
 13 Sono: [one more]
 14 Shun: [if] i want to (1.0) if not if I (4.0)
 15 Hana; [think]
 16 Shun: [UH] for example_
 17 Hana: yea
 18 Shun: i want to eat food but (2.0) not convenient store (1.0) i cannot food i cannot eat food and (1.0) twelve hour
 19 Hana: ah::.
 20 Sono: AH [0.2] every time open,
 21 Shun: un every time open.
 22 Sono: ah ok i understand.
 23 Shun: i want convenient store.=

Group H seldom had communication breakdowns, probably because all participants chose their language carefully. When Chie said “... life in the city offers us easy access to supermarkets, schools, companies,” her language choice is a little more advanced than that in Moe’s previous remark about the convenience of city life:

[...] living in the city is very convenient for example and near we can buy things in the supermarket, convenience store and anywhere and if i want to see a movie, I can go to movie theater and if I want to eat something I can go out for meals. many many restaurants.

The participants did not have problems understanding Chie's utterance here, maybe because their language proficiency is sufficiently high to comprehend and/or because Chie's idea here is merely a paraphrase of the idea Moe previously mentioned. Chie briefly summarized the point being discussed using a little more sophisticated vocabulary than Moe probably because she predicted that the listeners would understand her point even if she used difficult words because the idea had been already discussed.

Chie's careful choice of lexical item was also evident in the following exchange (lines 24-31):

- 24 Mika: but thats your happiness?
25 Chie: YEAH because_(1.0)
26 Mika: ah [laugh]
27 Chie: [NOT ONLY] my HAppiness but in these days the (.) cri-crime rate is high
28 Moe: [um]
29 Mika: [um]
30 Chie: [so] i-i worry about (.) worry about going home on foot_
31 Mika: =[ah:]

After Moe's restatement discussed in the paragraph above, she mentioned the crime rate as another criteria when determining whether she would prefer the country or city as a place to live. When she said "crime rate" (line 27), she seemed to hesitate to use this word by pausing very briefly and repeating part of the word (i.e. false start). Two reasons were possible here. The first reason may have been that she was not sure whether her lexical choice was correct or incorrect. The other reason may have been that she was not sure whether the listeners would understand this word. Hearing Moe and Mika's impassive reaction to her utterance, Chie appeared to sense that they did not understand her intended message fully. She further explained her personal feeling using an example that the listeners might sympathize with so that they would understand her intended message (line 30). Mika's response in line 31 showed that Chie's adjustment incorporating a personal feeling as an example successfully helped the listeners understand her idea.

After this exchange about the crime rate in the urban area, Nami effectively used the lexical item used in earlier discussion. The following excerpt showed that Nami used the word "crime rate" when she explained that the crime rate was not a major factor in determining a place to live.

- 32Nami: so (.) my opinion is eh matte people in the city is happier than in the
\$wait\$

- country.
- 33 Mika: [how come]
- 34 Moe: [why do you think so]
- 35 Nami: as: chie said, (.) uh cities are very convenient and and i: can go anywhere so quickly city is tran- (.) uh so quickly and actually my hometown (.) z crime rate is very high_
- 36 Mika: UH um.
- 37 Nami: in tokyo (.) uh {giggle} uh (.) i dont care about it because (.) uh (.) the main reason is
- 38 Moe: [hh]
- 39 Nami: [i] i accustomed to that strange person

When she used this word, she did not show any hesitation. Rather she focused on delivering her intended message about her hometown and personal experience. According to the interview notes, she was not hesitant because Chie used this lexical item earlier and the group members knew what crime rate was at the time that Nami used the item again. In this respect, Nami's lexical choice was quite effective.

Another incident that illustrated the use of shared knowledge was a strategy used by listeners. In the following excerpt, Mika, Nami and Moe listened to Chie's idea that easy access to a school was an important factor when deciding a place to live because she worries about walking in the street by herself.

- 40 Chie: [so] i-i worry about (.) worry about going home on foot_=
- 41 Mika: =[ah:]
- 42 Nami: [uh huh,]
- 43 Chie: [alone,]=
- 44 Moe: =ah::=
- 45 Chie: =so if the school is near to my house, i really happy i really i can feel safe
- 46 Moe: mm=
- 47 Mika: =but uh (1.5) i think in the country therere not so much (.) bad person (.)
- 48 Nami: um YEAH
- 49 Mika: to (.) to [attack you]
- 50 Chie: [{laugh}] ah
- 51 Mika: because therere very (.) you know (.) because all (.) of them live (.) in (.) peace,
- 52 Moe: [mm]
- 53 Chie: [uh huh] but (.) yeah yeah i see your point but also (.) theres (.) therere less hospital in the country side=
- 54 Mika: =uh =
- 55 Chie: =so if-if i- (.) if i become a serious (1.0) serious disease, maybe (.) the hospital in the country cant treat [my]

56 Moe: [thats a good] point
57 Chie: disease or_ {{laugh}}
58 Mika: {{laugh}}
59 Nami: {{laugh}}

Mika and Nami both reacted to Chie's opinion about being afraid of walking in the street (line 40). Their verbal responses were so immediate that their utterance latched and overlapped Chie's utterance (lines 41 and 42). This quick response showed the shared feeling and experience among the speaker and listeners to a great degree, and this indicated that the listeners effectively used their shared experience to interpret the speaker's intended message. Moreover, the slight rising tone made by Nami showed that she predicted that Chie would continue her utterance. In fact, Chie continued wrapping up her idea in line 45.

Moreover, a slightly delayed response in line 44 to Chie's above idea by Moe showed Moe's greater reliance upon the bottom-up processing when interpreting a speaker's intended message. According to the interview notes, when Chie discussed walking in the street, Moe imagined a picture of herself walking in the street with someone else until Chie continued by saying "alone" in line 43. In fact, immediately after Chie completed her utterance to deliver her intended message in line 43, Moe also showed her agreement by saying "ah" (line 44). The prolonged "ah" indicated that the word "alone" (line 43) complemented the missing information and led to her agreement with Chie's idea.

In the same exchange, another listener's strategy was evident. Immediately after Chie successfully used an example of worries about walking in the street alone, Moe showed a neutral reaction "Mm" (line 46) showing that she did not totally agree with Chie's idea that she could feel safe if she lived near her school. However, unlike Moe's reaction, Mika's next utterance was not merely a minimal reaction. It latched Moe's reaction and discussed the small number of criminals in the country to challenge Chie's opinion (line 47). From the following loud verbal response, it is apparent that Nami agreed with Mika's idea that the country had a fewer criminals. Nami expressed the strength of her agreement by raising her voice (line 48). Mika's choice of the low crime rate in the country led her challenge to Chie's opinion to a success.

In response to Mika's quite persuasive challenge, Chie had to show her agreement by saying "yeah, yeah, I see your point" (line 53). Immediately after agreeing with Mika's idea, Chie started discussing the number of hospitals as a factor that helped her choose the urban area over the country. In this way, she deliberately avoided continuing discussing the crime rate because she was persuaded by Mika's previous remark. By agreeing with Mika's idea, Chie effectively avoided a topic in a non-face-threatening way.

Conclusion

Although the nature of discourse analysis is interpretive and the results in the

present study based on the interactional sociolinguistic approach might not be generalized, the difference between the two groups of learners should offer some useful suggestions for further research and teaching practice.

In order to communicate intended meaning, speakers must know what they and their interlocutors share in terms of schema and lexical items. Since the discrepancies in schema and lexical items among interlocutors seem to cause miscommunication and communication breakdowns, learners should be trained to presume what cultural and linguistic knowledge the listeners know. The present study examined the group discussions among learners in the similar age range and language proficiency level; thus, the speakers had few differences in terms of their language proficiency levels as well as cultural and educational background. However, it is important to note that the learners must develop their skills to choose appropriate language based on the level of shared knowledge among interlocutors. It seems that the higher level learners tend to choose lexical items based on what they believe their listeners know more effectively than lower level learners. This strategy seems to lead successful communication in their group discussion.

Another important implication in the present study is that the listeners' use of top-down processing when interpreting the speakers intended messages plays an important role in successful communication. When listeners used their schema effectively in order to understand the speaker's idea, the communication came along. Especially when the speaker's language proficiency is limited and the utterance contains language errors, listeners must be able to use top-down processing to understand. In the present study, the lower level learners also successfully communicated when they effectively used schema when comprehending messages. It should be noted that the top-down processing in listening comprehension is crucial in successful communication not only in understanding native speaker's speech, but also non-native speakers' speech which contains linguistic errors. Or top-down processing could possibly be even more crucial when non-native speakers are communicating because the linguistic information available in their speech production is not always precise or adequate for effective communication. Therefore, top-down processing in listening comprehension should be emphasized in an early stage of foreign language teaching.

Finally, the purpose of the present study was not to investigate the discourse using other approaches than the interactional sociolinguistic approach. However, other approaches will definitely complement the findings of the present study. In order to thoroughly understand the learners' interaction in the group discussions used in the present study, other approaches such as conversation analysis and speech acts theory help to conduct microanalysis of differences between the high and low level learners' interactions. The differences all together should be useful information when educators make pedagogical decisions about what to teach as well as what criteria their assessment should be based on. Therefore, further research using different approaches should be encouraged.

Appendix

Transcription Conventions (Adapted from Spencer-Oatey 2000)

Meaning	Symbol	Example
The Words Themselves Unintelligible text Guess at unclear text False start	(???) (word?) wo-word	(???) i mean natural (leaves?) nothing to the imagination Idea is cl-very clear to me now
Links between words or utterances Overlapping text Latching	word [word] word =	A: everyone has [one] B: [of course] even Doris does= A: =yeah she does
Pausing Micropause Pause of indicated length	(.) (0.5)	well (.) enjoy (.) hm (.) what do i enjoy just let me (0.7) just let me handle this
Prominence Lengthened/very lengthened segment Emphasized syllable/word	wo:rd/wo::rd NEver/NEVER	oh it must be re:ally scary A: this is natural B: this is not NATural
Intonation Strongly rising tone Slight rising tone Low rising tone Slightly falling tone Slightly falling, final tone Continuing tone	word? word, word' word; word. word_	this is from the traditional? or political? however, if you say, eh they are not equal i mean natural' and come back again in the evening; yes yes right. did you ever, have (0.5) well any_
Relevant additional information	{descriptive comment}	{coughs}/{laugh}
English translation/gloss	\$English English\$	A: hontoni? \$really?\$

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