

Co-construction in Peer-peer Discussions

Kio Iwai

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Japanese university students' peer-peer discussions qualitatively and examines how learners proactively support each other. It also investigates if and how such support helps students' language learning. The participants in this study are first-year university students. Eight 16-minute peer-peer discussions were video-recorded, and two stretches of active interactions were extracted, coded and analyzed qualitatively. The results found learners not only jointly created an utterance but also engaged in problem-solving and building knowledge cooperatively. It seems the speakers' continuous endeavor to convey the message induced listeners' cognitive and affective support and effort to clarify the speakers' ideas. There was also evidence of learners' internalizing some lexical items they learned during the co-construction. Finally, the importance for creating a supportive, friendly and non-face-threatening classroom environment is stressed.

INTRODUCTION

Promoting active learning has recently been the focus of educational discussions in Japan. Originally, active learning was defined as "instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing" (Bonwell and Eison, 1991, p.5). In Japan, active learning first captured attention when the Central Council for Education (2012) introduced it as a teaching and learning method as opposed to traditional didactic education. It listed group discussion, debate, and group work, among others, as ways to realize active learning. The Central Council for Education (2016) defines active learning as proactive, interactive and deep learning. In the field of higher education, however, the word "active learning" is used multi-dimensionally. Sekita (2017) explains it as an umbrella term including various pedagogical approaches, course designs, teaching strategies, and learning activities. In this article, I would like to focus on active learning as a learning method and define it as "learners interact with each other proactively and think deeply about what they are doing."

English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Japan is a 28-week compulsory course for all first-year students. Regardless of their English proficiency, students are encouraged to participate in extended discussions on a single topic for 16 minutes or more in every lesson (Hurling, 2012). Although peer-peer discussion is what the Central Council for Education and many teachers assume to promote active learning, I have noticed that having students engaged in pair or group discussions does not promise active learning will occur. While in some discussions, students mechanically ask questions and answer them, in other discussions, students arrive at a deeper understanding as a result of continuous efforts trying to understand each other. This sparked my interest to analyze students' interactions to find out what is happening in a discussion where learners participate proactively and think deeply about what they are doing. My research interest lies in how to encourage university students to be active participants in English discussions.

Negotiation of meaning, which arose from Interaction Hypothesis, was the first focus. According to Long (1996), the best way for learners to acquire a language is through interactional adjustments. That is, when there is a communication breakdown, learners and their conversation partners try to overcome the difficulty by modifying their speech to make it comprehensible to the other party. This process is called negotiation of meaning. Ellis (2008) classified negotiation strategies as requests for clarification, confirmation checks, recasts, repetition, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and explicit correction. In EDC, students learn Communication Skills

phrases (Appendix A) in the first lesson and are encouraged to use them throughout the course. As Communication Skills phrases basically serve as negotiation of meaning, I designed information-gap activities to promote negotiation of meaning in class (Iwai, 2019). The idea of these activities was to induce communication breakdown by design, and make students solve it by adjusting their speech. Although it served the purpose of raising awareness for the need of negotiation of meaning among students, it did not necessarily lead to increased negotiation of meaning in peer-peer discussions even when there was communication difficulty. That made me wonder if overcoming communication breakdown was not the only key to activate discussions.

From a sociocultural perspective, verbal interaction mediates language learning when it occurs within the learners' zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1987). When learner A assists learner B in performing a linguistic function which otherwise B could not have performed alone, this assistance is scaffolding. Scaffolding is different from negotiation of meaning in that it not only helps the learner cognitively but also helps "the affective states of the learners attempting to achieve the goal" (Ellis, 2008). It means causing fear in a student may "reduce the possibility that a ZPD would be enacted" (Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2011, p. 83), and "lending support to others (...) can build confidence" (Mahn and John-Steiner, as cited in Swain et al., 2011, p. 83). Is it possible that students take negotiation of meaning as rather face-threatening and they try to support each other without using negotiation of meaning? Foster and Ohta (2005) investigated classroom interaction using both cognitive and sociocultural approaches. From a cognitive perspective, they found relatively low frequency of negotiation of meaning signaling communication problems. Analyzing the same data sets qualitatively from a sociocultural perspective, however, they found instances of co-construction, self-correcting, and continuers while learners assist each other to express themselves. Continuers "function to express an interlocutor's interest in what the speaker is saying and to encourage the speaker to go on" (Foster & Ohta, 2005, pp. 420-421). This kind of supportive interaction resonates with collaborative dialogue which is defined by Swain (2000) as "dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building" (p. 102). If students are supporting each other to jointly solve problems in discussions, ZPD should be created and learning must occur.

Below, I analyzed Japanese university students' peer-peer discussions qualitatively and examine how students support each other. Foster and Ohta (2005) found co-construction, self-correction, and continuers in the interactions of English learners in London and Japanese learners in America, but could the same be found among Japanese university students? I would also like to investigate if and how such interactions might help students' language learning, using the following research questions:

1. What interactional processes occur when students are trying to support each other during discussions?
2. Do students use any lexical and morphosyntactic items, which they learned from such interaction, during the same discussion?

METHOD

Participants

The participants are fourteen first-year students of a Japanese university. I selected Class A (7 females, 1 male) and Class B (5 female, 1 male) because the students are from the same department, and have relatively low English proficiency, in hope of finding more negotiation of meaning and peer support. Foster and Ohta (2005) reported that greater utilization of negotiation of meaning and mutual assistance was found with learners of lower proficiency. TOEIC L&R scores of the

students in Class A are in the range of 455-465 (equivalent to CEFR A2 level), and those in Class B are in the range of 115-290 (equivalent to CEFR A1- lower A2 level).

Data collection

Data was collected during normal class times in the fourteenth lesson of the first semester. In each class, I video-recorded two 16-minute group discussions (Discussion 1 and Discussion 2). There were two simultaneous discussions carried out (Group 1 and Group 2), with each discussion group having 3-4 members. That means altogether eight 16-minute video-recordings were made.

Data analysis

I watched all the video-recordings and checked for the parts when students were engaged in a series of active interaction. I found two such stretches of interaction: one from Discussion 2, Group 1 in Class A and another from Discussion 2, Group 2 in Class B. Both groups used the same discussion questions (Appendix B). I then transcribed the two sets of conversation, coded them according to the transcription glossary (Appendix C), and analyzed the data qualitatively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Excerpt A from Discussion 2, Group 1, in Class A

This is a four-person discussion. R, A, Y and M are discussing difficult things about studying that first-year university students experience.

- 1 A: I agree with you / choosing classes is difficult /
- 2 R: why do you think so?
- 3 A: it's mainly because/ erm first year (1) this spring semester / I can't choose me me major
sgujeito? { looking at R and then Y }
- 4 R: { puzzled }
- 5 Y: ah { nodding } =
- 6 A: = for example / I have to choose in the sports study (1) { laughter }
- 7 R: learning physical? / learning mental? =
- 8 A: = yes / I want to create a movie / [and suppose it.
- 9 R: [ahh
- 10 A: but I can't choose [in (.5) spring semester.
- 11 R: [ahh ok ok
- 12 A: I / I'm not interesting in / in / the sports /
- 13 R, M & Y: ahh { looking at each other and nod }
- 14 A: or ki kiristo? ku kuristo?
- 15 M: kiristo? / ahh
- 16 A: kiristo?
- 17 M: reli/
- 18 R: religion? / ahh { looking down uncertainly }
- 19 A: hmm? { bending forward }
- 20 M: religion / { confidently }
- 21 A: ano /
- 22 R, Y & M: un un un un { nodding }
- 23 A: do you understand?
- 24 Y: understand /
- 25 R: I understand /

In this excerpt, A is trying to say that choosing classes is difficult because first-year students, in the Spring semester, have to choose classes from subjects that are not closely related to their major. For example, A has to choose from classes like sports studies and religion studies, although her major is expression studies. There are two times when A asks for help. The first occasion is in line 3 when A says, “I can’t choose me me major sgujeito?” with a rising tone. While A’s intention is to say, “I can’t choose major subjects,” nobody is able to help her reform the utterance, with only Y showing understanding by nodding and saying, “ah.” From here, A starts making effort to make herself understood by giving examples of the subjects she is not interested in. R tries to do confirmation check adding more examples by saying, “learning physical? / learning mental?” Other students show understanding mostly by saying, “ahh.” Thus, the interaction from line 6 to line 13 is considered to be negotiation of meaning. The second time A asks for help is in line 14. A wants to say “Christ” or “Christianity” and uses the words “kiristo” and “kuristo.” In line 15, M shows understanding by repeating the Japanese word “kiristo?” and adds “ahh.” In line 16, A repeats “kiristo?” with a rising tone seeking for more help. Then in line 17, M tries to give an English word “religion,” but she can only recall the beginning sounds “reli.” Following this, in line 18, R says the complete word “religion,” but with uncertainty. M confirms this positively in line 20 repeating “religion.” Although A cannot say this word in English (possibly because she does not know it), in line 22, other students send her a message that she does not have to repeat it by saying, “un un un un (yes, yes, yes, yes).” When A asks “do you understand?” in line 23, Y and R confirm their understanding. We can call this interaction from line 14 to 25 collaborative dialogue or co-construction of the four participants, because A could not have conveyed her message without the other interlocutors’ help.

Interestingly, A is not the only one who benefited from this interaction. It is worthwhile to note that M uses the word “religion” after one minute of the above interaction. In the following excerpt, in line 28, M starts saying, “kiristo,” then after a half-second pause, she restates it as “religion.” This suggests that M has learned the word “religion.”

- 26 M: in my opinion / homework is hard for me=
 27 R: = ahh /
 28 M: it’s mainly because / for example / I’m writing a report? / fro / since (.5) Thursday / it is hard and kiris (.5) religion (.5) religion =
 29 A: = class =
 30 M: = religion class / yes /

Furthermore, in the above excerpt, it is A who helps M to complete an utterance. In line 28, M tries to say that she is writing a report for a religion class. M replaces the word “fro(m)” with “since.” When she falters after saying “religion” twice, A continues by saying, “class.” Then, M confirms it by saying, “religion class / yes.” It can also be seen as co-construction of M and A.

Excerpt B from Discussion 2, Group 2, in Class B

This is a three-person discussion. K, N, and O are discussing difficult things about daily life that first-year university students experience.

- 1 K: in my opinion (1) money [money / N’s opinion (2) to / agree / agree
 2 N and O: [uh-huh
 3 N: ahh {nodding}
 4 K: hmm (1) lacosse /
 5 O: uhh {nodding}

- 6 K: very spend of money
 7 N and O: ahh
 8 K: a lot of spend money?=
 9 O: =circle? circle?=
 10 K: =club (2) spend (2) spend my / hmm? / myself (1) nanda? nnto (1) arubaito tte job=
 11 O: =part-time job=
 12 K: =part-time job money all spend to {gesture} =
 13 N: =part-time job
 14 K: ahh lacrosse club
 15 O: because after club=
 16 K: =yes=
 17 O: =you go with friends / a you go eating?
 18 K: no no no / lacrosse practice is very morning / morning / only morning practice / only morning
 19 O: yeah
 20 K: nnnto (1) afternoon time is all part-time job
 21 N and O: (1) oh
 22 K: ok? understand?=
 23 O: =ok but you have no money {pointing at K} / why?
 24 K: hmm {looking up} because lacrosse very spend / very spend / for example / nnto nanteittara gasshukutte nante iuno? {rolling hands}
 25 O: ahh
 26 K: do you follow me? gasshuku toka / or / and (1) protector? protector? {moving his hands up and down}
 27 O: ahh
 28 N: [expensive
 29 K: [aand / sou expensive helmet and uniform bibs=
 30 N and O: =ahh=
 31 K: =with cross / with spike {hurryingly}
 32 O: item?
 33 K: item very busy / busy janai / very expensive
 34 O: [ok ok
 35 N: [ahh

Here, K is trying to say that money is a difficult problem for him. He spends all the money he earns from his part-time job for the lacrosse club because he has to pay for training camps and buy expensive sports gear. With his very limited English ability, however, he has to implement a variety of strategies to get his meaning across to other people. First, he often repeats words to emphasize them. For example, in line 18, he repeats the word “morning” four times, because he thinks this is the biggest reason why he does not go out for dinner with his teammates. Secondly, he frequently paraphrases himself. For example, in line 6, he says, “very spend of money” and in line 8, he paraphrases it by saying “a lot of spend money?” Third, he uses gestures a lot. The most successful example is in line 26. By moving his open hands up and down in front of his chest, he conveys the word “protector” to his peers. Fourth, he often uses comprehension checks. In line 22, he says, “ok? understand?” and in line 26, he says, “do you follow me?” to check understanding. Lastly, when there is no alternative, he requests for an English equivalent of a Japanese lexical item. For example, in line 24, he asks, “nnto nanteittara gasshukutte nante iuno?” (let’s see, how can I ... how do you say ‘gasshuku’ ?”), though nobody is able to answer.

K's persistent effort to make himself understood is constantly supported by the other interlocutors. We can find co-construction in the following interaction. In the next excerpt, K explains he spends his money on *gasshuku* (training camp) and protectors. He tries to check understanding by saying, "protector?" with a rising tone with a gesture. O shows understanding with "ahh." Then N guesses these must be costly and throws in the word "expensive." As soon as K hears this word, he accepts it by saying, "sou" (right) and uses the word confidently saying, "expensive helmet and uniform bibs."

- 26 K: do you follow me? *gasshuku toka / or / and (1) protector? protector?* {moving his hands up and down}
 27 O: ahh
 28 N: [expensive
 29 K: [aand / sou expensive helmet and uniform bibs=

Another thing I would like to draw attention to is O's follow-up questions in lines 15, 17 and 23. In line 15 and 17, O wants to confirm her guess that K has no money because he goes out eating with his club members after club practices. To answer this question, K explains that he has only morning practices. In line 23, O asks why K has no money if he is not spending money on dining-out. Then K starts explaining what he spends money on. Thus, O's follow-up questions serve to clarify what K really means.

Finally, I would like to point out that K uses the lexical items, which are given by other people, later in the same discussion. In line 11, O gave the word "part-time job," K repeated it immediately in line 12. Later in line 20, K uses the same word as in "afternoon time is all part-time job." Another case is found in line 28, 29 and 33. In line 28, N gives a word "expensive", in line 29, K adopts the word as in "expensive helmet and uniform bibs." Later in line 33, K uses the word again when he said, "item very busy / busy janai (not busy) / very expensive."

CONCLUSION

In the above two excerpts, co-construction was found even in the absence of overt communication breakdown. Especially in Excerpt A, students not only jointly create an utterance but also are engaged in solving a problem and building knowledge cooperatively, which can be called a collaborative dialogue.

My first research question was: "What interactional processes occur when students are trying to support each other during discussions?" In Excerpt A, in lines 14-25, while jointly creating an utterance, students assisted each other both cognitively and affectively by asking for help, showing understanding, giving a fragment of a word, trying to complete the word, and assuring comprehension. Before this sequence of co-construction, we can find A's continuous effort to make herself understood by checking understanding which is accompanied by her interlocutors' showing understanding. Thus, there was a foundation of tenacious negotiation of meaning before the co-construction starts. In Excerpt B, in lines 26-29, students created an utterance together by using comprehension checks, giving a possible reason, and incorporating the given word. Before this co-construction, K uses all kinds of communication strategies including repeating words, paraphrasing, using gestures, comprehension checks, appeal for assistance and language switch. In response to K's effort, other students actively show understanding, interest, encouragement, and ask follow-up questions to clarify. In these four lines of interaction, we can find both cognitive and affective support. Overall, the speakers' endeavor to convey the message seems to make their interlocutors want to support them. The assistance includes giving words that they may want to say, giving reactions to show interest and encourage

them, and asking follow-up questions to draw more clarifications. From a sociocultural perspective, learners supporting each other during interaction means ZPDs are created, and therefore it is expected to lead to their language progress.

My second research question was: “Do students use any lexical and morphosyntactic items, which they learned from such interaction, during the same discussion?” In Excerpt A, M used the word “religion,” which students found together, later in the same discussion. In Excerpt B, K used the word “part-time job” and “expensive,” which his interlocutors gave him, on later occasions. This suggests learning has occurred during the interactions. It should be noted, however, that co-construction was limited to only lexical items. The fact that students did not focus on form may be attributable to their low English proficiency. When meaning is not clear in communication, focusing on meaning may have more priority than focusing on form.

The implication of this study is that the presence of co-construction could be a sign of active discussion. When there occurs co-construction, learners proactively support each other thinking deeply about how they can possibly make meaning together. In order to encourage co-construction during discussions, it is important for teachers to create a supportive, friendly and non-face threatening environment in the classroom, as ZPD is supposed to be created and learning occurs when learners feel affectively supported to achieve the goal. Learning is a collaborative activity, after all.

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APPENDIX A – EDC Communication Skills

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1. Comprehension	
Active Listening	Checking Understanding
I see. Okay. Right. Sure. Uh-huh. Really? Sorry, I don't understand. Sorry, I don't follow you.	Do you understand? Do you follow me? Do you see what I mean?
2. Paraphrasing	
Paraphrasing Others	Paraphrasing Yourself
Do you mean...? So, are you saying...? So, in other words, ...?	I mean... What I'm saying is ... In other words, ...
3. Clarification	
Asking for Explanation	Asking for Repetition
Can you explain? What does {X} mean?	Could you repeat that, please? Could you say that again, please?

APPENDIX B – Discussion 2 Questions

Discussion 2: Challenges for First-Year Students

❖ Imagine you are helping Rikkyo University's Open Campus. If high school students asked you "What were some difficult things you experienced during the first semester at Rikkyo University, and how did you solve them?" what would you tell them?

1.  **Studying** choosing classes, homework, when to study, where to study, teacher, textbook, etc...

2.  **Daily Life** getting up, money, health, games, drinking, busy, cooking, washing, club and circles, crowded trains, etc...

3.  **Human Relationship** friends, seniors, parents, boyfriend & girlfriend, co-workers, neighbors, fashion, money, loneliness, etc...

❖ Discuss your ideas with a partner.

Discussion 2

1. What are some difficult things for first-year university students? How can they solve them? Discuss:

- Studying
- Daily life
- Human relationships

2. What could be good advice for future Rikkyo students?

APPENDIX C – Transcription Glossary

- / indicates the minimal but clear pause between phrases/ sentences in normally paced speech
- (.5) indicates pause of half a second
- (1) indicates pause of one second
- ? indicates rising intonation (including questions)
- [xxx indicates overlapping speech
- [yyy
- = indicates that the utterance occurs seamlessly after the next utterance
- {zzz} comments describing aspects of extra-linguistic communication, such as voice inflection, laughter, facial expressions, gaze, hand movements, etc.