

A Sociocultural Analysis of English Learners' Cooperative Behavior in Elementary School Classroom

教育内容・方法開発専攻

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1. Introduction

Since 2011, English has been a compulsory subject in Japanese elementary schools. Fifth and sixth graders are given 35 hours of instruction each year. The course objective stated in *the course of study* (the national curriculum guideline) *for foreign language activities* is to form the foundation of basic communication abilities.

To successfully grow the communication ability, pair work and group work are now commonly used in second language classrooms. Particularly in classrooms with a large number of students, language lessons tend to be teacher-centered, with learners listening passively to the teacher for most of the time. In response, pair work and group work have caught the attention of teachers and researchers in the language education field as these have the potential to provide learners with more experience of the target language.

Cooperative learning is a type of learning activity in which pair or group of learners work together towards a shared goal. Achieving the goal of the task is prioritized and it provides a richer social context, allowing interaction to take place more naturally and frequently. Considering these features of cooperative learning, cooperative learning looks promising especially in the FLA classroom.

In particular, we would like to observe and analyze classroom interaction from the Vygotsky's framework of sociocultural theory (SCT). SCT claims that social interaction, particularly verbal interaction, leads learners' further learning.

2. Literature Review

Shikata (2011) conducted cooperative English lessons at primary school and analyzed student language learning based on the perspective of SCT. Shikata concluded that cooperative learning strengthens student relationship and it promoted their willingness to communicate. Huang (2012) interpreted students' dialogue by using three SCT terms; scaffolding, collective scaffolding, and mediation by artifacts and concluded that task-based language teaching (TBLT) will provide excellent opportunities, where dialogical interaction naturally takes place and lead the participants to the internalization of language. Shikata and Huang were successful to apply SCT concepts to interpret students' dialogue in FLA elementary classroom. Since the result are not still decisive in that students' second language development took place, further studies for investigation of students' language learning process are necessary.

3. Research Questions and Method

In this research, I applied SCT concepts "awareness" and "volition" to investigate L2 learning process through language activities. In Vygotsky's work, awareness refer to the state that one can define in words the concepts that one learned; then can explain (Shibata, 2006). Volition follows awareness, and it refers to the state where one can control one's thoughts by using words (Nakamura, 1998). I analyzed students' cooperative dialogue based on the perspective of SCT. I would like to focus on the relationship between learners and objectives of cooperation and how these two elements effect on awareness and volition in their learning. Three research questions are posed as below.

Q1, Does the relationship between students influence the emergence of awareness and volition?

Q2, Does the objective of cooperation influence the emergence of awareness and volition?

Q3, How do awareness and volition relate with each other?

Data were collected using two video recorders. Also voice recorders were used for recording detailed dialogue among students. I asked students to write a reflection paper about the learning at the end of the lesson.

The participants were 39 fifth grade students and 32 sixth grade students in an elementary school taking English lessons once a week.

In this research lesson, we created an original lesson based on “*Hi, friends!*” which is English textbook used in elementary schools. We used the sentence, “What ~ do you like?” (inserting a word related to animals, sports, shapes and colors can fit in space of ~) and as a response, “I like ~”. We organized the lessons into “information collection” and “information application” activities. To create cooperative learning, I designed each activity based on Kagan’s four principles for cooperative learning (positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation and simultaneous interaction).

4. Results and Discussion

As to RQ1, It was proved that the conditions for emergence of awareness and volition. The relationship among students influenced the emergence of awareness and volition. We found two conditions that triggered awareness and volition. One is an equal relationship among students to learn from each other. The other is the responsibility for explanation of what they know.

Regarding RQ2, meaning of volitional use of second language was discussed. The objective of cooperation influenced on the emergence of awareness and volition. The data indicated that cases of volition were found only in information application activity. The

most likely explanation is that volition of utterance follows awareness. We may say that we need to set a dialogical activity for awareness raising before we let students say target sentences volitionally.

Another important element to the volitional use is the Japanese (L1) use as a process of L2 use. We found L1 use in the students’ volitional language use in L2. Student used L1 as a meditational tool before using same meaning of L2. We cannot always force students to use L2. Especially, they are in the level of using L1 as a meditational tool for L2 use.

As for RQ3, students’ cognitive process towards volitional use of second language is found. One can safely state that awareness has 5 levels towards volitional use of language. If the student does not have image to the word, the student need some assistance; direct answer, hints, or reaction. From the perspective of ZPD, more capable peer’s help which is in level of potential development lead student’s volitional use of language.

5. Conclusion

The study investigated the students’ L2 learning process from the perspective of SCT concepts; awareness and volition. This study proved that conditions for emergence of volition and awareness, meaning of volitional use of second language and students’ cognitive process towards volitional use of second language. Learning English in elementary schools has been compulsory since 2011, most of the students encounter English in elementary school for the first time. Although overall exposure to English in elementary is short, based on conditions and process for emergence of awareness and volition we have discussed, we can create dialogical activity for emotive and playful experience as a first step of English learning. This research showed that language learning was promoted through awareness and volition triggered by student’ cooperative learning.

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