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Collaborative construction of online L2 task accomplishment through epistemic progression

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Abstract

Technology-mediated task-based language learning and teaching has long been a research focus (Chapelle, 2001; Gonzalez-Lloret & Ortega, 2014). The focus has mainly been on the task-as-workplan (Ellis, 2003) leaving the process aspect as a research gap (Breen, 1989; Seedhouse, 2005). Therefore, the collaborative and interactional nature of language learning tasks remained largely unexplored or misguided by etic constructs. This study aims to describe the interactional unfolding of online task-oriented collaboration of undergraduate students who are also learners of English as a foreign language (L2). Seven L2 learners have participated on a Google Hangouts video meeting for the study, discussed some clues, and hinted their teammates in order to complete a task collaboratively before the other teams do. The naturally occurring interactions of the participants have been recorded via a screen capture software. A 90-minute long recording has been transcribed and examined using conversation analysis (CA) methodology. As result of a turn-by-turn single case sequential analysis, an emergent recurring pattern has been discovered. It has been found that whenever an unknowing participant's candidate answer is confirmed by a knowing participant, the sequence is expanded and therefore enhanced, and then it functions as an epistemic progression (Gardner, 2007) step which takes the learners to the knowing position through accumulation of knowledge. This finding has showed that the learners close knowledge gaps, construct and accumulate knowledge, and thus accomplish tasks collaboratively through epistemic progression. It has also showed that an investigation into the process aspect of tasks may bring new insights into an understanding of the nature of collaboration occurring in and through online task-oriented interaction.

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1. Introduction

The interest in the use of technology within the context of foreign language learning and teaching has been a major research concern especially following the advent of the Internet (Chapelle, 2001, 2003; Gonzalez-Lloret & Ortega 2014; Jenks 2014). The most significant impact of the Internet technology has been by means of communication that online tools provide (Jenks, 2014). Although many researchers focused on the merits of online communication for language learning particularly with respect to meaning-focused pedagogical tasks that put the students into interaction (cf. Chapelle, 2001, 2003; Gonzalez-Lloret & Ortega, 2014), only few paid attention to micro-details of social interaction within these online environments (cf. Negretti, 1999; Jenks, 2014). This study examines such social

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interaction in English as a foreign language using conversation analytic methodology (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013) and adopts a social interactionist perspective (Pekarek Doehler, 2013) on task-oriented L2 interaction to gain a participant-relevant emic perspective (Firth & Wagner, 1997), which can show the resources that the interactants use to make meaning. Conversation analytic constructs such as turn-taking, sequence and preference organization, and repair is used to present such perspective. Given that the interactants' intersubjective co-construction of a socially distributed cognition (Kasper, 2009) is made accessible to the analyst through turns-at-talk (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013) as they engage in the tasks and interact with each other, the main analytic focus is on the micro details of naturally occurring interaction. Therefore, the findings are expected to make an impact on task-based language learning and teaching (TBLT) literature through micro-detailed descriptions of online task-oriented L2 interaction. The main contribution of this study to task-oriented interaction (Seedhouse, 2005a) will be the explication of language learning tasks as a process rather than focusing on them as a workplan (Ellis, 2003) in an environment in which tasks and technology are integrated.

To this end, task-based interaction in the context of technology requires further attention for an effective integration of tasks and technology. Gonzalez-Lloret and Ortega (2014) identifies five key features for such an integration which combine various theoretical underpinnings of TBLT: (1) primary focus on meaning, (2) goal orientation, (3) learner-centeredness, (4) holism, and (5) reflective learning. The first key feature refers to that even if there is a workplan in terms of language learning goals, it should be hidden and implicit. Goal orientation is task-facilitated orientation of the learners towards a communicative purpose in order to find opportunities to gain "some outcome resulting from task completion" (Gonzalez-Lloret & Ortega, 2014:6). Learner centeredness is the specific emphasis on learner needs and wants. Holism refers to the task and real-world relationship. Finally, reflective learning requires a focus on learners' idiosyncratic experiences of the task, thus "do things with their own words" (p. 6). The task that the participants try to accomplish collaboratively will be discussed in comparison with these features. To lay the ground for a discussion in terms of the task accomplishment process and tasks and technology integration, this paper will first present a literature of review on epistemics in L2 interaction which will provide a better understanding of the task-based interaction that is shaped around epistemic differences of the participants, and then conversation analysis methodology will be described. After the CA analysis of the data, a discussion will follow and the paper will be concluded.

2. Epistemics and L2 interaction

This study focuses on epistemics in interaction as has been mainly shaped by Heritage (2012a, b; 2013a, b) within conversation analytic methodology. Heritage (2013a) defines epistemics in interaction as "knowledge claims that interactants assert, contest and defend in and through turns-at-talk and sequences of interaction" (p. 370). Knowledge claims are an inevitable part of task-based interaction especially when information gaps are at hand. It is possible to understand how the learners position themselves in terms of their knowledge and how they co-construct knowledge with other interactants through a sequential analysis of talk-in-interaction that occurs within a domain or territory of knowledge which consists of positions to be occupied on an epistemic gradient. Their positions on the gradient can vary from K+ (knowing) to K- (unknowing) (Heritage, 2012b), which refers to epistemic status. However, this relative status of knowledge also requires speakers' "moment-by-moment expression" (Heritage, 2013a:377), that is their epistemic stance.

Epistemics in interaction has also been investigated in language classrooms (Sert, 2011, 2013, 2015; Sert & Walsh, 2013; Jakonen & Morton, 2015; Sert & Jacknick, 2015). Sert (2011) focused on how L2 speakers claim insufficient knowledge in the classroom and found out the resources that they use to do such claims. Headshakes were reported to be "the most common verbal indicators of claims of insufficient knowledge (CIK)" (Sert & Walsh, 2013:553). CIKs make an explanation relevant that could bring about an opportunity for understanding. Another significant finding is that when a teacher faces a CIK, he usually allocates the turn to other students (Sert, 2011; Sert & Walsh, 2013). Sert (2013) also showed how information imbalances can be traced in adjacency pairs and sequence organization in his research on "epistemic status checks (ESCs)", which is defined as "a speaker's interpretation of another interactant's state of knowledge, which is initiated when a second-pair part is delayed" (p. 17). ESCs project insufficient knowledge through making it relevant for the analysis of the other students, the teacher, and thus the analyst (Sert, 2013).

Jakonen and Morton (2015) have also made a great contribution to epistemics research on L2 interaction with their study on epistemic search sequences (ESSs). ESSs are peers' or group members' collaborative work to close a knowledge gap. The gap is noticed and treated as "a joint problem" which requires participants to "negotiate

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