Profiling second language sociolinguistic development through dynamically administered strategic interaction scenarios

Rémi A. van Compernolle *

Department of Modern Languages, Carnegie Mellon University, Baker Hall 160, 5000 Forbes Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Grounded in Vygotskian sociocultural theory, this article explores an approach to qualitatively profiling second language sociolinguistic development through dynamically administered strategic interaction scenarios. The approach integrates dynamic assessment principles in order to arrive at a dual evaluation of a learner's capacities: first, the zone of actual development, as evidenced by independent performance, and second, the zone of proximal development, as evidenced by what a learner is able to achieve with support. A single case analysis of one L2 French learner, Laurie, and her developing control over the variable use of the proclitic negative particle *ne* in verbal negation (i.e., presence vs. absence of *ne*) over a six-week period illustrates the approach to profiling L2 sociolinguistic development.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

This article explores an approach to profiling second language (L2) sociolinguistic development by engaging learners in dynamically administered strategic interaction scenarios (D-SISs). Drawing on Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; for L2, Lantolf and Thorne, 2006), the approach integrates dynamic assessment (DA) principles (Poehner, 2008) in order to conduct a dual evaluation of learners' sociolinguistic abilities: first, an evaluation of learners' independent abilities, or what Vygotsky (1978) referred to as the zone of *actual* development (i.e., past or completed development) and, second, an evaluation of what learners are able to achieve with assistance, or the zone of *proximal* development (ZPD). Accordingly, D-SISs expand the evidential basis for evaluating L2 sociolinguistic abilities by including those abilities that are in the process of maturing but are not yet under independent control. Through the provision of assistance during performance, emerging abilities are rendered visible and, because DA unites teaching and testing as a single activity (Lantolf and Poehner, 2011; Poehner and Lantolf, 2010), it becomes possible to promote the further growth of such abilities during an assessment task as well as over the course of several tasks.

The data analyzed in this article have been taken from a larger study of a Vygotskian approach to teaching L2 French sociolinguistic and pragmatic practices through concept-based instruction (Van Compernolle, 2012, 2014). D-SISs were integrated into a pedagogical enrichment program as a means of linking learners' emerging conceptual knowledge of language (i.e., variable L2 forms and their meaning potentials) with their spoken performance abilities. The analysis focuses on a case analysis of one learner's, Laurie (a pseudonym), emerging control over one specific variable feature of French: the presence vs. absence of the proclitic negative particle *ne* in verbal negation (see below).

* Tel.: +1 412 268 1122.
E-mail address: vancomp@cmu.edu

2. Evaluating L2 sociolinguistic competence

The concept of L2 sociolinguistic competence derives from Canale and Swain's (1980) extension of Hymes' (1964, 1972) notion of communicative competence to the domain of L2 teaching and testing. Hymes acknowledged that the ability to produce grammatical utterances was important (cf. Chomsky, 1965), but he insisted on expanding the purview of linguistics to include situated communicative activity, culture, and appropriateness.[1] Sociolinguistic competence, for Canale and Swain, entailed *sociocultural competence*, defined as the ability to recognize and use linguistic forms to index appropriate registers and/or speech styles "within a given sociocultural context depending on contextual factors such as topic, role of participants, setting, and norms for interaction" (p. 30). This interacts with the concept of grammatical or linguistic competence inasmuch as while it is necessary for L2 learners to be able to understand and construct well formed utterances, they must be able to connect such utterances to social meanings, contexts of communication, participant roles, and so on. Canale and Swain's (1980) notion of sociolinguistic competence has been expanded and revised numerous times over the past three decades (e.g., Bachman, 1990; Canale, 1983; Celce-Murcia, 2007; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995). However, the core argument that L2 learners need to know how to use formally possible utterances (their linguistic knowledge) in ways that are appropriate to their sociocultural context of use has remained (Dewaele, 2008; Leung, 2005). This is particularly relevant to features of language that are variable along the sociostylistic dimension, where variable forms may index contextual formality, social relationship qualities, activity types, and so on.

Evaluations of L2 learners' sociolinguistic competencies often focus on the use of sociostylistic variants in some form of elicited speech situation; that is, the relative frequencies of different sociostylistic variants in learners' speech. Competence in sociostylistic variation is typically evaluated in comparison to native speaker norms, often with a focus on the integration, or absence, of less formal, everyday sociostylistic variants in learners' speech. For the purposes of this review, three exemplar research programs focused on L2 French sociolinguistic competence will be described in some detail: Mougeon and colleagues' research on French immersion students' in Toronto (compiled as a book in Mougeon et al., 2010); Sax's (2003) doctoral thesis that involved a cross-sectional study of US university learners of French; and Regan and colleagues' study of Irish university learners of French in a study abroad context (compiled as a book in Regan et al., 2009). These exemplar studies have been chosen because they are representative of the traditional methods used to evaluate L2 (French) sociolinguistic competence as evidenced through elicited speech. In addition, they have been very influential in research into sociolinguistic competence, including the larger study from which this article draws.

Mougeon et al.'s (2010) research investigated the sociolinguistic competence of high school French immersion students in grades 9 and 12 in Toronto, focusing on 13 grammatical, lexical, and phonological variables. Their data included semi-directed sociolinguistic interviews with the students conducted by a native speaker of French. In addition, Mougeon et al. explored stylistic variability in the students' educational materials (e.g., textbooks) and in classroom discourse (i.e., teachers' speech). Their findings revealed that students tended to use more formal sociostylistic variants during the interviews, which aligned with the level of discourse found in textbooks and teachers' speech in the classroom. However, increased exposure to authentic French beyond an educational setting (e.g., engagement with French-language media, stays in Quebec with a French-speaking family) correlated with higher rates of mildly marked informal, though not colloquial/marked, variants in the learners' speech. Thus, Mougeon et al.'s research suggests that, while the effects of educational input, which tends to be more formal in terms of level of discourse, are strong, students' who are exposed to French outside of the classroom can acquire at least some of the sociolinguistic competencies (i.e., patterns of variation) typical of native speaker communities.

Sax (2003) conducted a cross-sectional study of US university learners of French: second-year and fourth-year undergraduates and graduate students. Like Mougeon et al. (2010), Sax sought to evaluate learners' sociolinguistic competence (i.e., use of more formal and more informal variants) in relation to educational factors and exposure to French outside of school, focusing on two grammatical and one phonological variables. Instead of sociolinguistic interviews, however, Sax designed two role-play scenarios in an attempt to elicit intraindividual variation—that is, a more formal style in one scenario (a mock job interview) and a more informal/everyday style in another (meeting a new roommate). The results of her study showed that time spent abroad in a French-speaking country was the most important factor considered in the study in that increased contact with native speakers of French outside of a formal educational context tended to correlate with the increased presence of more informal sociolinguistic variants (cf. Mougeon et al., 2010). Sax also found that learners may acquire informal variants, which are not typically taught in school, in study abroad before developing a sensitivity to social–contextual constraints on variation (i.e., in which contexts more formal or more informal variants are more appropriate). In other words, acquisition of informal forms in addition to the more standard or formal forms taught in school did not necessarily equate to the ability to use the different variants in socially appropriate ways.

For their part, Regan et al. (2009) explored the influence of study abroad on the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence by Irish university learners of French. Their data included semi-directed sociolinguistic interviews similar to those used in Mougeon et al.'s (2010) study. Whereas Mougeon et al.'s (2010) and Sax's (2003) research showed that students' reported exposure to French and time spent in a Francophone environment (e.g., during study abroad) correlated with increased use of informal variants, Regan and colleagues were able to track this development by directly comparing a cohort of their

---

[1] Hymes certainly was not alone, or the first, in making this argument. However, space does not permit a full discussion of other similar ideas, so only Hymes' work, and its extension to L2 teaching and testing, will be addressed here.