Qualitative Analysis of Korean Language Learners' Conversations with Their Conversation Partners

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1. Introduction

Academic interest in conversation/discourse analysis in L2 and FL learning has grown among applied linguists and educators with the recognition of the value of interaction in promoting language learning (e.g., Cazden, 2001; Hall, 2001; Hall & Verplaetse, 2000; Larsen-Freeman, 1980; Rivers, 1987; van Lier, 1996). Much discourse analysis of learner interactions, however, focuses either on teacher–student or student–student conversations within conventional classroom settings (e.g., Allwright, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 1980; Schinke-Llano, 1994). Other analyses of language learner talk examine naturalistic second language acquisition (SLA) in informal, social contexts (e.g., Barraja-Rohan, 2003; Gaskill, 1980; Mori, 2003; Peck, 1996; Schwartz, 1980; Wong, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c).

One interactional language learning context that has received little analysis is that of formally assigned conversation partners (CPs). CP interaction is a mainstay in FL classes (Mori, 2002; Rivers, 1987). The pedagogical presumption is that through CP interactions, FL learners can be exposed to authentic input that is inherently of interest. Nevertheless, relatively little systematic attention has been paid to this form of institutionally sponsored yet communicative social interaction intended to enhance language learning.

While there are many influential factors in second language learning—for example, learner characteristics such as age, personality, and intelligence—the critical dimension in language learning is interaction with other speakers (Hatch, 1983). Learners must practice communicating in the target language extensively to develop their ability to communicate in the target language. As Larsen-Freeman (1991) pointed, the more they engage in the regular use of their target language and receive the greater quantity of input, the more learners demonstrate an ability to use their target language. In this regard, CP activity outside the classroom is a widely recommended practice (see, for example, Hall, 2001). However, despite the importance of the role of CP or the usefulness of the CP activity, it has been very rarely examined empirically.

The present study, rooted in a sociocultural perspective that highlights the role of interaction in language learning, examined conversational interactions of
heritage and non-heritage learners of Korean with their native Korean-speaking conversation partners. Examination of the selected discourse data amplified some valuable insights into how heritage and non-heritage learners talk-in-interaction was organized and illustrated the difficulties Korean language learners (KLLs) dealt with in conducting extended conversation in Korean in a qualitative fashion by proposing an organizing model of the role of dyadic language proficiency in KLL–CP discourse.

2. Methods

Data in this study were transcripts of conversations recorded from sixteen KLLs as they conversed in pairs with their native Korean-speaking CPs. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the 16 KLLs and their CPs by personal variables (heritage status and self-assessed Korean proficiency for KLLs and length of stay in the US and self-assessed English proficiency for CPs). For the measure self-assessing one’s proficiency in Korean (for KLLs) and in English (for CPs), both KLL and CP participants were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Not at all" to "Very well" in terms of comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

The 16 KLL–CP pairs agreed to participate in audio-taping their weekly conversation meetings with a native-speaking CP. Four CP meetings for each of 16 KLL–CP pairs were recorded, resulting in approximately 64 hours of recording. Upon completion of recordings, the sampled segments of the recorded data were transcribed following a simplified adaptation of Jefferson’s (1984) transcript notation system. Selected segments of a total of approximately 64 hours of recording of 16 KLLs’ conversations with their native Korean-speaking CPs were the qualitative data source in this study.

3. Results

Undoubtedly, language proficiency is the key to communication between native speakers of different languages, and it had a powerful influence on success in the CP meetings in this study. After examining the transcripts of these CP meetings, it became apparent that interactional success was a function of the joint language proficiency of both members—that is, dependent on dyadic language proficiency. When both learner and CP interacted in their deficient language—mostly Korean for learner and English for CP—lots of miscommunication and misunderstanding occurred. Perhaps because the heritage learners were in general at higher levels of Korean proficiency, it appeared that non-heritage learners had more difficulties in getting their meanings across during their conversations with their CPs. For both heritage and non-heritage learners, Korean was their foreign language, rather than a true