Interviewing Returnees to Inform Classroom SLA Research

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Abstract

Every year, students all around Japan take advantage of various opportunities to study English for an extended period in the countries in which it is spoken as a first language. As Dornyei and Csizer (2005, p. 328) observe, living in another culture "creates opportunities for developing language skills and acts as a powerful influence shaping the learners' attitudinal/motivational disposition, thereby promoting motivated learning behavior." While the primary beneficiaries of such study abroad programs are the students themselves, teacher-researchers in Japan can also benefit by interviewing returning students about their experiences, thus gaining direct insight into various aspects of second language acquisition (SLA), such as motivation, interlanguage development and communication strategies. This is important because "principles learned through research are understood more deeply and are likely to be applied with greater responsibility and commitment" (Rost, 2002, p. 202). With this in mind, the purpose of the current paper is to present the findings of an interview conducted with a Japanese university student following his experience studying English at a university in Canada.

Introduction

For students of English who have the opportunity to study abroad, being immersed in a native linguistic environment presents significantly more opportunities for exposure to natural language than studying the language several hours a week in an educational institution in a non-native linguistic environment such as Japan. Even more importantly, studying and living in an English language environment greatly increases opportunities for social interaction; by necessity, the learners interact and converse with their homestay families, people at school and, presumably, people in the

community. From a socio-cultural perspective, it is through these interactions and collaboratively creating meaning to understand their new environments that learners acquire language. Specifically, the interactions between a learner and native speakers (or advanced learner) provide scaffolding within the learner's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), thus promoting appropriation of knowledge. And, because of the frequency of these interactions, learners studying abroad generally experience rapid improvement in oral communication. In fact, for the teacher-researcher working in Japan, it is this rapid improvement that makes returning students a valuable source of knowledge regarding language acquisition. Returning students generally have an advanced level of oral proficiency compared to students who have not studied abroad, thereby making it possible to conduct interviews in English with them. Through those interviews, teacher-researchers can directly observe and gather concrete examples of linguistic features of language acquisition, such as communication strategies and interlanguage development, while also gathering valuable information regarding learner attitudes and motivation. The purpose of this paper is to present the results of one such interview.

Research Design/Data Collection

As Ellis (1997, p. 15) clearly states, "the main way of investigating L2 acquisition is by collecting and describing samples of learner language." There are, however, several research designs and related tools for collecting language samples (data). Hughes (2002) addresses the issue of research design and suggests that, "given the situatedness and context sensitivity of speech data" (p. 33), a qualitative design is preferable to a quantitative design, especially "in the realm of work carried out by teachers into issues which affect them most directly (broadly called 'Action Research')" (p. 31).

In selecting a tool for data collection, it was necessary to consider the purpose of the study, which was not only to obtain examples of linguistic features related to language acquisition, but also a detailed description of the subject's experiences living and studying abroad. Both Spolsky (1998) and Seliger and Shohamy (1989) point to the interview as an effective tool for gathering this type of in-depth information. Furthermore, Seliger and Shohamy (1989) indicate that the interview is also appropriate for gathering more discrete information, such as learner motivation and strategies:

> In second language acquisition research, interviews are used to collect data on covert variables such as attitudes (toward the target language, or the ethnic group whose language is being learned) and motivation for learning the second language. They have also been used recently for obtaining information about strategies which language learners use in the process of producing and acquiring language in a variety of contexts. (pp. 166-167)

Therefore, the interview was determined to be the best tool for gathering data that would provide the most complete and in-depth information. The interview, which lasted approximately forty-five minutes, was conducted as an informal conversation. However, an audio recording was made in order to gather data and ensure accuracy during subsequent transcription and analysis.

Interview Background

The author is a full-time English instructor at a Japanese university located outside of Tokyo. The author and interviewee, Kei[1], became acquainted after Kei returned from his study abroad experience in Canada and enrolled in the author's Oral English course; in fact, Kei had sought out a course with a native English-speaking instructor so that he would have the opportunity to maintain his English proficiency. The interview was conducted several months after the course had ended and Kei was no longer a student in the author's courses.

Interviewee Background

The interviewee, Kei, is a twenty-year-old Japanese male who is studying at a private university located outside of Tokyo. Kei's first language is Japanese and he was raised in a monolingual Japanese home environment in Tokyo, Japan. Kei's father, mother and two younger sisters live in Tokyo. Kei's father is fifty years old and works as an event coordinator. His mother is forty-five years old and works part-time at a pharmacy. One of his sisters is fifteen years old and is in high school and his other sister is thirteen years old and is in junior high school.

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1   A pseudonym is used to protect the student's privacy.

English Education in Japan

Kei began studying English in elementary school. At that time, Kei's English classes were taught in Japanese by Japanese instructors. The lessons included grammar instruction, choral repetition of conversations, reading short stories, and looking up vocabulary and memorizing it. Kei reported that, in elementary school, he was not very serious about studying English; he just thought it was 'cool'. Although Kei made light of his attitude about English, having a positive image of a language and the speakers of that language has been shown to contribute to motivation to learn the language (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Kei continued to study English in junior high school and the lessons were similar to those in elementary school, but there was also an English conversation class with a native speaker. It was at this point that Kei initially became more serious about studying English because he felt that English proficiency would allow him to have more job opportunities in the future. This is consistent with Lightbown and Spada's (1999) findings that a learner's perceived need to speak a language is a motivating factor toward language acquisition. In the evenings, Kei attended a 'cram' school where he studied grammar and prepared for the third level of the national English proficiency examination. From the perspective of socio-cultural theory, Kei's decision to attend a cram school also indicates his motivation, as well as goal setting. According to activity theory, the learner actively seeks out learning opportunities and also creates goals and strategies to reach those goals (Donato and McCormick, 1994, in Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.199). In Kei's case, his goal was becoming proficient in English, which, at the time, meant improving his grammar and passing the national English proficiency examination. He then established a strategy of attending a cram school where he could obtain the necessary skills to accomplish his goal. It was also during junior high school that Kei first became interested in studying in an English-speaking country. Although he was unable to do so at that time, his interest in studying abroad indicates a change, or perhaps expansion, of his view of proficiency. Whereas his initial focus had been on grammar and passing a written examination, interest in studying in an English-speaking country indicates interest in improving his oral communication in English. In high school, Kei continued to take English classes, but, he did not have a conversation class and there were no native speakers; his classes included grammar instruction, reading stories and translating them from English to Japanese, and memorizing vocabulary. Kei indicated that, because of this form of instruction, he did not find his high school English studies to be very interesting or useful.

Consequently, during his last year of high school, he made up his mind to study abroad after entering a university. Therefore, although he had been offered athletic scholarships from several universities, he decided to attend a university where he would have the possibility of studying abroad. After entering his university, he learned about the opportunity to study in Canada for six months. So, he enrolled in that program and, during his second year of university, attended an English as a Second Language (ESL) program at a Canadian university for six months.

Studying English in Canada

Kei reported that when he went to Canada, his English level was very low and he had an extremely difficult time communicating. He gave as an example that he did not even know how to make simple requests, such as, 'Can I have…' or 'I want…', so it was a while before he felt confident enough to go to the local coffee shop. In order to make himself understood, he relied on simple vocabulary, gestures and phrases from a travel phrase book; as Brown (2007) points out, relying on prefabricated patterns is a typical compensatory strategy for very low-level learners. Of course, Kei also enlisted the assistance of his classmates and his host family. And, from the perspective of socio-cultural theory, through negotiation of meaning with higher-level learners and native speakers, Kei developed the communication strategies and received the scaffolding necessary to aid his language development (Mitchell and Myles, 2004). However, asking others for help with his English posed somewhat of a problem for Kei. Initially he often interacted with classmates in English and with his host family. If there was some situation or vocabulary that he did not understand, he felt he could ask someone to explain it to him. However, one day one of his classmates apparently became irritated by Kei's inquiries and told Kei to figure it out for himself. After that, Kei hesitated to ask questions and he even refrained from asking people to repeat things he had not understood because he did not want to bother them. This points to Peirce's observation that, "…inequitable relations of power limit the opportunities L2 learners have to practice the target language outside the classroom" (Peirce, 1995, p.12). In Kei's situation, after being reprimanded by his classmate, Kei limited his own opportunities to negotiate meaning. Nevertheless, based on Kei's current conversational ability, that did not greatly inhibit his progress, perhaps because he had already developed several important communication strategies.

Communication Strategies / Developmental Errors

As Brown (2007) explains, communication strategies can be separated into two categories: avoidance and compensatory. Kei's language during the interview exhibited the use of both kinds of communication strategies. Firstly, he used code switching, a compensatory strategy whereby learners temporarily use another language, usually their first language, to provide information that is not known in the second language. The following are two examples of Kei's code switching during the interview:

> 1) Uh….'Eiken'…you know? ('Eiken' is the English proficiency examination)

> 2) So, I got a 'Eiken'…three… 'sankyu'. ('sankyu' means the third-highest level)

During the interview, Kei also used a compensatory strategy referred to as 'appeal to authority.' In this strategy, when learners do not know a word or phrase, they ask someone who is more knowledgeable than they are. Kei utilized this strategy twice in the interview:

> 1) How can I say…uh…medicine…medicine something?

> 2) How can I say like…go, went, gone?

The second variety of communication strategy is avoidance. As the name suggests, this strategy involves avoiding a particular aspect of the language. In the interview, Kei used lexical avoidance:

> 1) Yeah…my…my parents d..doesn't. Can't…can't speak another language.
>   (Here, Kei abandoned the verb 'do' in favor of 'can')

Despite making good use of communication strategies, learners will inevitably make errors. In fact, errors are a sign that learners are employing learning strategies to develop their interlanguage (Ellis, 1997). As Harmer (2007, p.138) explains, "developmental errors are part of the students' interlanguage, that is the version of the language which a learner has at any one stage of development, and which is continually re-shaped as he or she aims towards full mastery." These errors can be divided into 'interlingual', caused by the influence of the first language on the second

language, and 'intralingual', caused by processing within the second language (Littlewood, 1984). Kei's language exhibited both types of errors. Within the category of 'interlingual' errors, also known as transfer errors, there are several kinds of errors, such as syntax errors, omission of the verb with adjectives, and pronunciation errors. The following is an example of a syntax error that Kei made:

> 1) Japanese sentence change to English.
> (He meant, 'change Japanese sentences to English.')

And here is an example of the omission of the verb with adjectives:

> 1) Very tired. ("I was very tired.")

> 2) So…I thought important. ("I thought it was important.")

Actually, as Thompson (2001, p. 219) explains, the omission of the verb with adjectives is common among Japanese learners of English: "Japanese has a class of 'adjectives' which behave largely like verbs…This can lead students to treat English adjectives like verbs, at least to the extent of omitting the copula be: That film good."

And finally, here is an examples of two pronunciation errors which are also common among Japanese learners of English. In the following example, 'th' is replaced with 's' and 'v' is replaced with 'b':

> 1) I don't [s]ink go to…I don't [s]ink to…go to..[B]etnam.
> ("I don't think go to…I don't think to …go to Vietnam.")

As was mentioned previously, there are also "intralingual" errors. These errors can be separated into overgeneralization and omission. Some examples of Kei's overgeneralization errors are:

> 1) plural 's' with quantifiers:
>   1a)… junior high school third years.

> 2) use of past even though there is an auxiliary verb:
>   2a) So, I didn't went to coffee shop.

The second kind of intralingual error is omission. Here are two examples of omission:

　　　1) omission of verb inflection:
　　　　　1a) I thought…I <u>can</u> enter the good…good company. (could)
　　　　　1b) I couldn't go there because I <u>belong</u> to baseball clubs.
　　　　　　　(belonged)

Finally, Kei exhibited several lexical errors. The following are two examples:

　　　1) Kei used 'looks like' instead of 'looks':
　　　　　1a) First, <u>looks like</u> cool.

　　　2) Kei used 'another' to mean 'other':
　　　　　2a) And my <u>another</u> younger sister is…

The examples above show that Kei is still making a variety of errors, both interlingual and intralingual. However, as has already been discussed, these errors merely indicate that his interlanguage is still developing. As Kei continues to implement the communication strategies that he demonstrated in the interview to negotiate meaning, his interlanguage will further develop and he will move closer toward greater proficiency.

Conclusion

Students of English who have returned from extended study abroad programs offer teacher-researchers in Japan an important opportunity to conduct research into second language acquisition. Because of their English immersion experiences, returnees have developed greater oral proficiency than their counterparts in Japan. This makes their language development an interesting subject for investigation and it also makes it possible for them to be interviewed in English, which is necessary to obtain speech data. Thus, through the interview, teacher-researchers are able to gain first-hand knowledge and data about their own students' motivations, interlanguage errors and communication strategies. And, because the information obtained has direct relevance to their students, teacher-researchers can more easily apply the findings to their own teaching. In this way, the linguistic development that students make through study abroad experiences can benefit themselves, teacher-researcher and other students as well.

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