Dynamics of Pair-work in a JFL Classroom: Benefits of Collaborative “Languaging”

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1. Introduction
Increasing numbers of studies examine peer collaboration/pair work in the language classroom (Lundstrom & Baker 2009; Ohta 2001; Storch 2001, 2002, 2008; Swain & Lapkin 1998, 2002; Swain et al. 2009; Yoshida 2008; Watanabe & Swain, 2007, 2008). Previous literature indicates that multiple factors impact the interaction of pair work and learning outcome: (non-)collaborative orientation, affect, (perceived) differences in proficiency levels in pairs. Pair examination at different levels (e.g., novice/expert or same level) reveals that student level per se is not as important as the way the interaction evolves to affect learning outcomes. These findings have significant pedagogical implications. Since instructors often debate whether they should help students form pairs (on the basis of proficiency level or other) or how to guide them to carry out the assigned tasks. The present study further examines pair work dynamics by focusing on pairs of equivalent level to uncover the kinds of interaction promoted by them to learn/consolidate new knowledge.

Another goal is to focus on the ‘languaging’ used in form-focused pair work in activities designed to review Japanese locative particles. Recent studies underscore the importance of ‘languaging’ or verbalization (Swan 2006; Swain & Lapkin 1998, 2002; Swan et al. 2009) when attempting to learn the target language. We investigate how Japanese-as-a-foreign-language (JFL) pairs of learners engaged in ‘languaging’ make use of teacher-fronted explicit instruction (giving semantic types of locative particles ni [existential, goal, time and purpose] and de [location, instrumental, range, and manner]).

2. Method
Thirty-seven learners of third-semester Japanese in a US university participated in two pair-work activities: Activity 1 required learners to identify the semantic type of particles in sentences, and in Activity 2 learners reviewed each others’ in-class writing for completing a communicative ‘translation’ task. The scores of in-class writings and fill-in-the-blank tests conducted at three points in time (pre-test, post-test, 4-week-delayed post-test) were used to determine the level of learning. Qualitative analyses were performed on the interaction (audio-recorded and transcribed) and on follow-up interviews. One pair is a “gaining pair” in which both improved in the immediate post-test and one improved further in the delayed post-test. The other is a “non-gaining pair” who improved in the immediate post-test but did not maintain their gains in the fill-in-the-blank delayed-post test.

3. Results
The “gaining pair” actively engaged in joint searches for meanings in Activity 1 (Excerpt 1), and later, N was able to provide the correct label of the semantic type and reasoning (Excerpt 2).

(1) 1. N: Oh, yeah, hikooki-de aimashita. Hum…(2) 1. N: kyooto-de mimashita.. I want to say state?
   2. G: location?          2. oh, wait, now
   3. N: er==         3. where you saw it?
4. G: on the plane, meeting 4. so that would be location for an action.
5. N: yeah, you’re absolutely right.

In Activity 2 when G initiated error correction, N again explained the reasoning in line 5.

(3) 1. G: what is the third line below? What’s going on here?
2. N: here? sono ato Bob-no ita hotel-ni ... ah, fura dance no party-ga arimashita.
3. after that. The hotel that Bob stayed at is where the fura party was,
4. so, I guess it’s de, does that make sense to you?
5. after what happened here, which is a noun modifying clause,
6. Bob-no ita hotel. The hotel that Bob stayed at is where
7. G: you got that grammar structure here wrong, you can’t do anything
8. N: I guess that should be de.
9. G: yeah, now I see what’s going on (laughter), all right

In contrast, the “non-gaining pair” did not elaborate on their identifications of semantic types of particles both in Activity 1 and 2. In Activity 1 (Excerpt 4), although they corrected themselves, they did so without much ‘languaging’ (lines 4-5).

(4) 1.M: kazoku-ni ai-ni ikimasu.
2.Y: this is a direction. (long pause) gohan-o tabe-ni kaerimasu
3.M: direction, as well.
4.Y: isn’t that purpose?
5.M: tabe-ni… yeah. That’s the fourth one: location, goal, time, and purpose?
6.Y: yeah. kooi-hi-o kai-ni ikimasu. That’s also purpose. I think A is also purpose.

4. Discussion
It was found that learners who actively engaged in ‘languaging’ during pair work gained more from the activities and maintained their knowledge (as measured by the fill-in-the-blank test) to a larger extent in long-term. Learners who exhibited ‘limited engagement’ (Storch 2008) did not retain their knowledge as much. A follow-up interview revealed that the limited engagement in the non-gaining pair was partially due to M’s perception that both M and Y knew the answers. This study analyzed the dynamics of pair work in a JFL classroom, and the results underscore the importance of collaborative ‘languaging’. It offers instructors a pedagogical principle that it is important for them to encourage learners to deliberately question, explain and confirm their language choices when they work in pairs.

Selected References

List of Technical Terms
Languaging: According to Swain et al. (2009, p5), ‘languaging is a form of verbalization used to mediate the solutions(s) to complex problems and tasks’.