Chapter 29

Using Skype to Focus on Form in Japanese Telecollaboration:
Lexical Categories as a New Task Variable

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the effects of lexical categories on Focus on Form (FonF) and the use of multimodal features of Skype for preemptive and reactive Language-Related Episodes (LREs) in a task-based language exchange via Skype (i.e. telecollaboration). Twelve pairs of Japanese-as-a-foreign-language learners and native speakers of Japanese engaged in two decision-making tasks. Each task prompt included target vocabulary of different lexical categories (nouns or onomatopoeia) that participants had to negotiate for task completion. The quantitative analysis of oral interaction revealed a significant effect of lexical categories on the total number and linguistic focus (i.e. morphological, lexical, and phonological items) of preemptive LREs, as well as the correction method, linguistic focus, and the uptake rate of reactive LREs. The analysis of multimodal interaction revealed that participants often used text chat, images, and webcams to carry out telecollaborative interaction and that the lexical categories affected which of these multimodal features of Skype are used for FonF.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in technology, particularly the development of synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools, have made it possible to break down the classroom wall and connect language learners around the world. Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) researchers postulate that network-based communication can enhance interactional negotiation and thus facilitate language acquisition. A number of studies from the interactionist perspective have revealed abundant evidence of comprehensible input and modified output resulting from CMC-mediated interaction (Blake, 2000; Kitade, 2000; Pellettieri, 2000; Smith, 2003, 2005; Warschauer, 1998).

Language exchanges using CMC tools, also known as telecollaboration or eTandem, have recently gained significant presence in the field as a way to engage foreign language learners in an organized partnership, linking language learners in one part of the world with learners in other parts of the world for reciprocal learning of languages and cultures (Cziko, 2004; Sauro, 2013). Although often used interchangeably, the term telecollaboration refers to international class-to-class partnership within institutionalized settings (Thorne, 2003), while eTandem refers to individual language learning in dyads, spending half the time in learner's first language (L1) and the other half in the target language (Brammerts, 2003; Tian & Wang, 2010). The major two-fold goal of such learning arrangements is the development of second language (L2) proficiency and intercultural competence (Belz, 2003; Zarate, 2003). As such, on the one hand, cognitive-interactionists examine telecollaboration for corrective feedback (Sauro, 2013; Vinagre & Muñoz, 2011; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008; Ware & Pérez-Cañado, 2007), negotiation for meaning (Bower & Kawaguchi, 2011; Kötter, 2003; O'Rourke, 2005), and tasks that elicit negotiated interaction (Hauck & Youngs, 2008). On the other hand, socioculturally-oriented researchers examine telecollaboration as a venue that promotes collaborative scaffolding (Lee, 2008), intercultural competence (Belz, 2003; Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; O'Dowd, 2003, 2006; Thorne, 2003; Ware, 2005; Ware & Kramsch, 2005), creation of online identity (Blake, 2006), and pragmatic competence (Belz, 2007). Whether learning takes place in the brain or in society, social interaction with native-speaking age peers via CMC tools has been shown to broaden the range of available discourse options in comparison to traditional L2 classrooms, to alter and increase the number of epistemic roles that learners may assume, and to create conditions under which learners desire to present and maintain positive face, which, in turn, may result in enhanced L2 performance (Belz, 2003; Belz & Kinginger, 2003; Belz & Vyatkina, 2005; Dussias, 2005; 2006; Kinginger, 2000, 2004; Thorne, 2003; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008).

While such numerous benefits of telecollaboration have been observed, telecollaboration has not been able to demonstrate itself as a way to focus on form (FonF) (Schwienhorst, 2000). The lack of telecollaborative literature on FonF is surprising when we consider learners' desire to improve linguistic accuracy (Akiyama, 2012; Vinagre & Muñoz, 2011; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008). For instance, Schwienhorst (2000) and Ware and O'Dowd (2008) documented a lack of FonF during actual telecollaboration and participants' desire to improve linguistic accuracy. As such, it seems imperative that more studies examine how to promote FonF in telecollaboration in order to meet participants' expectations by creating tasks that spontaneously assist telecollaborators' FonF.

One indicator of learners' FonF is the quantity and quality of language-related episodes (LREs), namely "any part of the discourse where students talk about language they are producing, question their language use, or other- or self-correct their language production" (Swain & Lapkin, 2001, p. 104). Although LREs have been used in many classroom studies (Basterrechea & García Mayo, 2013; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Révész, 2009, 2011), only one study has investigated LREs in eTandem/telecollaborative settings (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008). In a context like eTandem where a native-speaker (NS) functions as a tutor for a non-native speaker (NNS), establishing a reciprocal relationship to promote FonF is essential. In addition, creating tasks that can maximize opportunities to FonF should be investigated.

Along this line of research, the present study examined preemptive and reactive LREs that occur in a task-based language exchange via Skype. The study particularly looked at LREs in relation to tasks that targeted different lexical categories (nouns and onomatopoeia) in order to explore a task variable that could affect telecollaborators' FonF activities. The findings of this study can serve to inform practitioners of ways to promote FonF in Skype-based telecollaboration and contribute to the extensive body of research on task variables that can influence learner interaction.

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