ACQUISITION OF INTEGRATED LANGUAGE-CULTURE COMPETENCY IN A MULTI-CULTURAL WORK PLACE

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Abstract: *This paper examines data collected in a multi-cultural work place. It investigates the process of participants learning by doing and rigorously examines connections between language learning and cultural practices. The key concept is that participants acquire integrated competencies necessary for intercultural business practitioners in the actual field where multicultural participants work together through engaging in performing an authentic activity. The finding indicates that learning in the field is not about absorbing or imparting knowledge but gaining understanding of the world through participating in relevant activities.*

Key words: *learning by doing, competency, multicultural work place.*

1. Introduction

Globalization has made Japanese business activities different from those in the past. There are more frequent and multi-modal dialogues. Thus a compelling need exists for university graduates who are competent to work in multicultural environments. Global business practitioners need to integrate multiple competencies of knowledge and skills. Such competencies relate to various fields of disciplines including management, linguistics and intercultural communication. However, only a handful of past studies identified the composition of necessary competencies for working in a multi-cultural environment (e.g. Okamoto, 2008).

Previous investigations have identified issues in language and intercultural communication in Japan. For example, turns taken in business conversation by Japanese people are usually much fewer than non-Japanese (Du-Babcock & Tanaka, 2013). The issues of language and intercultural communication in Japan is affected by various aspects such as cultural assumptions (Yamada, 1992; Yotsukura, 2003), management systems (Sumihara, 1993), pragmatic differences (LoCastro, 1987), communication strategies (Tanaka, 2008), and education systems (Nakane, 2007).

Nakane (2007) argues that in Japanese educational systems, teachers usually emphasize written communication, classes follow a teacher-centred structure, and use a simple Initiation-Response-Feedback pattern. Consequently, students tend to be

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passive and waiting for teachers' direction. Instead of critical thinking, Nakane (2007) argues that, in the classroom, there is an absence of voluntary participation, competition for the floor and interaction among students. As Nakane's study shows that those educated in Japanese high school have difficulties in participating in academic discussion and mostly remain silent (Nakane, 2007). It could be partly the result of Japanese educational systems. Past studies show other variables interact with this educational issue (Du-Babcock and Tanaka, 2012). Consequently students entering intercultural workplaces are overwhelmed by challenges in completing tasks requiring integrated use of knowledge and skills.

Japanese companies are looking for talented employees to cope with multi-cultural environments. However, they are not aware of competencies that produce these talented employees. Most Japanese companies tend to focus on standard test scores (e.g. SPI [1] and TOIEC [2]) or educational qualifications. Meanwhile, Japanese universities try to develop such talents, by teaching English, intercultural communication and management separately. The efforts of universities, however, have not had successful outcomes. As a result, universities and companies both need to envisage a clear picture of required competencies. Universities wish to train their students to become human resources with competencies desired by companies.

Zhu and Bargiela-Chiappini (2013) emphasize the effectiveness of situated learning for class cross-cultural management communication. Following their argument, I focus on an activity theory based course situated in a multi-cultural context. Learning in the field is not about absorbing or imparting knowledge but gaining understanding of the world through participating in relevant activities.

Meisei University runs a Meisei Summer School Project (MSSP), which is a non-traditional course based on activity theory. Ideas of Activity theory are deeply embedded in the course. In other words, learning is situated in various kinds of activities all through the project. In MSSP, students learn through their social interactions with different stakeholders – university professors, student-teachers, children and their parents. Participants range from the novice to experienced, and include both Japanese and non-Japanese members.

Research Question - This study poses the questions: "What kinds of competencies are constructed in a multi-cultural job site?" and "How does the competency construction process take place?" As an ethnographer of communication and a participating researcher, I'll describe an insider's perspective of participants' holistic process of knowledge and skill acquisition, which takes place through participation in cultural and linguistic collaboration within the MSSP project. Moreover, this study argues that reflexivity is critical for a researcher to interpret and understand 'what is going on', in the project. By describing the process of participants' holistic acquisition of knowledge and skills, I'll further discuss the relevance of integrated ability as required competency in multi-cultural work place.

2. Conceptual framework

I'll base my data analysis on Vigotsky's socio-cultural theory. Vigotsky (1978) argues that leaning is a social process and meaning making is carried out through social interaction. I'll also employ the concept of competency in understanding my participants' communication process.

Deardorff (2009) asserts that intercultural competency is constructed through multiple elements.

2.1. Socio-cultural theory and activity theory

The challenges that current tertiary education in Japan face are how to teach these competencies. A new approach to equipping students with these integrated competencies is through a course based on socio-cultural theory (SCT), offering students' opportunities for learning by doing. Zhu and Balrgiela-Ciappini (2013) has documented effectiveness of their teaching students with real-world practice and cross cultural management. However, past research insufficiently discussed how students acquired this complex competency consisting mainly of language and intercultural communication abilities. Therefore, this study investigates the process of my participants learning by doing and rigorously examines connections between language learning and cultural practices. I frame the process of learning with SCT. The MSSP project is rooted in the Activity Theory (AT) reflecting the assumption of socio-leaning, which is advocated in the socio-cultural theory. This project assumes that human learning is viewed as a mediated process.

2.2. Competency

Taking a social constructivist perspective, the study attempts to identify the composition of required competencies from naturally occurring data in a multi-cultural work place. The competency I am investigating in the current research has be defined differently by different researchers. For example, Deardorff (2009) uses the word intercultural competence and argues that such intercultural competence consist of skill, ability and knowledge. In a

different line, Norisada and Kameda (2010) use the word international business communication competency. They contend that international business communication competency include competence, language, culture and trust. However, the ambiguity still remains. The question is whether their specific skills, ability and knowledge in language related to each other or stand separately. Or, are these elements complexly integrated with each other? So in this study I will pay special attention to different elements such as gesture, body movement and greeting in addition to language. These elements interact and may compose competency that I am looking for in a multi-cultural work place.

3. Methodology

3.1. Qualitative research methodology

This study will focus on the process of construction of competency and identifying crucial elements of competency. However, it's hard to measure competency in quantitative terms. For this reason, I employ qualitative research methodology to analyze competencies exercised by my participants in visual data that were recorded in MSSP 2012.

3.2. Data collection

Research site - I collected data at Meisei Summer School Project (MSSP). The project is sponsored by a university and non-government organizations (NGO). University students formed multi-cultural teams to teach English to local children. There is diversity in the team, non-Japanese international volunteers, students from different university and grades, faculty members and NGO officers work

together. In other words, MSSP is a multi-cultural work place.

Data collection methods - I employ ethnographic techniques in my data collection process. In this project I focused on one team and observed work place interaction including, small talk in lunch-breaks and after hour's interaction. The participants' interaction was video recorded and transcribed. The video recorded data were supplemented by data from interviews and my field notes. The social constructivist view provides me with a lens to examine my participants' learning processes and to find out the competencies they acquired in their multicultural work place.

Participants - I will briefly explain about my participants. I focus on one team, namely Team Spring, selected randomly. There were seven people in this team. There was one senior student, one junior student, three freshmen and two international volunteers who were from Mexico and Russia. As you can see in the graphs, team members are different in age, native language backgrounds as well as their experiences with MSSP.

Name	Age	Language backgrounds	MSSP Experience
Yuki	22	1 year study abroad + CEFL 2 years	3rd time
Taro	21	Lived in USA. For 9 years + CEFL 2 years	1st time
Hana	18		1st time
Jun	18		1st time
Ken	18		1st time
Carlos	23	Professional user	1st time
Helen	22	CEFL 3 years	1st time

Fig.1. *Team members*

4. Data Analysis

Rigorous data analysis identified three crucial elements in communication in multi-cultural work place: situated holistic communication, solidarity marker and social protocol.

4.1 Situated holistic communication

The findings from my data show that one of the important elements of competencies is "situated holistic communication". I coined the term "situated holistic communication" to refer to the ability to communicate with multi-cultural participants using limited English available to the speaker with the help of various communication resources specific to the situation. The interview data reveal that the MSSP participants in general believed that their English ability was poor. However, their performances in my video-recorded data indicate that some of them managed to communicate with international volunteers in specific situations successfully. They demonstrated their communication competency through a holistic way. In this section, I will demonstrate the process to achieve situated holistic communication in three steps: awareness , practice, and function.

First, I am going to describe the participants' views of their own English ability.

Awareness of English learned in high school - The data show that the participants were not confident in their English ability. They were not able to communicate in English before they attended this course. Their English ability can be described as "tacit knowledge" developed in their high school culture. This can be seen in the following interview data.

> Excerpt 1. Hana's Interview data (2012, 09, 14)
> Hana: I learned written English all though junior high and high school. In MSSP, I

needed to communicate orally. I wanted to say something; I was not able to verbalize it. Actually, I practiced only written form. Reading comprehension, answer to questions written in Japanese.

Hana: Like that. So totally different ways of using English. I couldn't say a word. I occasionally encountered a word that I knew. Somebody explained me then I was like "Oh, I knew it".

Excerpt 2. Jun's Interview data (2012,10, 17)

Jun: There were only 3 freshmen and Carlos. And we couldn't talk in English well…

Excerpt 3. Ken's Interview data (2012,10, 16)

Ken: I couldn't catch them. But I thought I should react anyway. And then I did some gesture but I thought I needed to say something anyway. But I couldn't say anything…

Ken: My listening skill was poor. I believed that if I wanted to do grammar, I could do it well. As for vocabulary, it's simple work, if I did it repeatedly, I could remember it…while, my listening is still poor.

Excerpt 4. Hana's Interview data (2012,09, 14)

Hana: I prepared very hard memorizing the initial greeting.

Hana: I memorized it, and then she said "nice to meet you" and I was ok, up to that moment. And later she continued with (xxxx unclear words) and I was like "wow, I don't understand at all".

The above data reveal that the English my participants learned in their high school heavily emphasized on written forms. However, when they talked with the international volunteers, they realized that the English they learned did not work at all. They became aware of the difference between English learned in their high school and the real world English mediated communication in MSSP. In the next section, I am going to illustrate how my participants communicate with international volunteers.

Practice in an actual multi-cultural work site - My participants attempted to communicate with international volunteers using their limited English, and other communication resources such as eye contact, gestures, documents and communication strategies.

Excerpt 5. Hana's Interview data (2012,09,14)

Hana: I realized my oral communication ability is like a junior high student and I thought like "oh my god" hahaha.

And like…I couldn't think of words and grammar. I only spoke unrelated words. Then she understood me and I felt good.

Both the above interview data demonstrate that Hana successfully achieved her communication goal using resources available to her including her limited spoken English. Jun thrived to communicate with international volunteers

using different kinds of communication strategies.

> Excerpt 6. Different ways of communicating. (2012,10,17)
> Jun: I asked him "Do you know Kaminari-mon?". Then he said "No". So I tried to draw a picture of it. Then, we found a picture on the brochure. And then everyone said "Is this the one?". (laughing) I remember that we talked like that. (laughing)

Jun communicated with international volunteers by using mediation such as pictures and YouTube. Situated holistic communication took place when the participants used not only language but also various communication resources to sustain interaction with international volunteers.

Functioning - In the Video data 1, Hana attempted to communicate with her group members using her limited spoken English. With the help of gestures, Hana could eventually make her meaning through and achieved communication goal.

Fig. 2. *Video data 1* (2012,07,24)

The data illustrate Hana's successful practice. Japanese student's learning process consists of 3 stages: awareness, practice, and function. They also learned how to be involved in English interaction by constructing social solidarity in communication.

4.2. Solidarity marker

The second important finding is "solidarity marker". I use the term solidarity marker to refer to the action of involving multi-cultural participants as team members.

Hana instructed Helen how to perform a special action of "Like this" which was designed to entertain children.

Fig. 3. *Video data 2* (2012,07,24)

The Video data show Hana's instruction. As you can see combined with the limited phrase of "Like this", she opened up her arms and turned her body around. This action draws attention from everyone at present and constructed a solidarity unit in that situation. This specific action later served as a situated solidarity marker among the team members and furthermore among the teachers and children in the classroom.

4.3. Social Protocol

The third finding from my data is "enforced practice". It is one of the learning processes revealed in my data. The following interview data reveal such point.

> Excerpt 7. Yuki's Interview data (2012,08,08)
> Yuki: They(freshmen) were frozen at the beginning. Hika, Hana and Ken. Then I said "I told you to greet". I forced them to greet. Then suddenly they were relaxed.

This interview data reflect such process of learning scaffold by Yuki. In this case, rather than awareness, learning began with "enforced practice". In addition, Hana functioned as a team member by saying "hi" every time she sees Helen and Carlos. She found out that greetings usually followed small talk which smoothly led her to involve in interaction.

> Excerpt 8. Hana's Interview data. (2012,09,14)
> Hana: Yeah, yeah, I was able to greet and I still couldn't speak English well. But when I said "hi", they all returned with greeting.
> Like that. I was not able to speak well but I kept greeting anyway. Then everybody was kind to me.
> Hana: My greeting triggers small talk and it would be good for me. I was able to catch the meaning and I said a few easy words then they understood and I was like "WOW I made it". That was fun so I kept greeting.

Hana's continuous greeting enhanced her relationship with international volunteers.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I discussed and demonstrated three elements embedded in cross-cultural communication in a multicultural workplace. My empirical research data reveal that communicative competencies were constructed through situated holistic communication, group unity built through solidarity markers such as gestures and body movement. In addition, social protocols help to initiate and maintain communication among participants.

This is an ongoing study and I have not reached a final conclusion. I hope the study will trigger more researches in identifying the elements in intercultural communication competency.

Notes and References

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