

JAPANESE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN'S IDENTITIES IN A MULTILINGUAL SPACE

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Abstract: *Language learning is based on social interaction. In order to understand children's identity, the research focused on the environment in which the child is immersed. For the purpose of this study, Gee (2014)'s notion of discourse was adapted, specifically the latter type which is discourse. In order to look into the identity of the children under this study, there is a need to look into the kind of environment in which the children are situated. Discourses also gradually have changed through social interaction. Therefore, discourses and identities were reconstructed by social interactions.*

Key words: *English, communication skills, discourse, Meisei University.*

1. Introduction

The purpose of English education in Japan is to nurture basic English communication skills (MEXT, 2008). Japanese elementary school children have English classes two or three times a week. However, Japanese elementary school teachers are not sufficiently trained to teach English. In addition, Japanese children have very few opportunities to speak English with non-Japanese English speakers.

Therefore, Non-Japanese teachers (Assistant Language Teachers: ALT) who speak fluent English, support Japanese teachers in English class. Historically and geographically Japan is an island country. Non-Japanese people are hard to come by in Japan unlike in Europe for example which is a more international continent.

2. Conceptual Framework

In this research, I used the following two concepts to frame my analysis. The first concept is Discourse as proposed by Gee (1996). The second concept I used is identity which is discussed by Norton (2013). These two concepts were used for my analysis of children's language use and identities in a multilingual setting. Traditionally, it was thought that language learning is achieved individually by each person. However, Norton (2000) focuses on the language learner's identity in second language acquisition (SLA).

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Language learning is not entirely knowledge. A language learner learns a language through social interaction. To understand children's identity, I focused on the environment in which the child is immersed. Therefore, conceptual framework of Discourse frames Genkidama which was the name of the class the children attended, I analyzed child's identity based on discourse.

2.1. Discourse

According to Gee (2014) discourse is a means in which people use language in either spoken or written form to interact with other people and it is a medium in which people exhibit a particular behavior, express their own personal thoughts and beliefs; all of which are considered to be a realization of an individual's identity.

Furthermore, Gee (1996) notes that there are two types of discourse: discourse with a small d and Discourse with a capital D. The former refers to the language in the ordinary sense of the word as in language in daily use which can be in either written or oral form while the latter is a collection of the different ways in which people communicate through either speaking or listening, and even reading or writing.

For this study, I adapt Gee's notion of discourse, specifically the latter type which is Discourse. In order to look into the identity of the children under this study, there is a need to look into the kind of environment in which the children are situated. Based on the definition of Discourse given above, each child participant is believed to have his or her own personal values, acts, beliefs and social identity.

2.2. Identities

This study seeks to examine children's identity through their participation in Discourse. The concept of identity is an important element. Gee (2014) believes that people have a number of identities in particular contexts. People behave differently in certain situations.

Discourse can be achieved through the interaction of different people and because each participant in the discourse has his or her own identity, then we can say that discourse is a result of the interaction of different people with different identities. By participating in discourse, the individual identity of each participant becomes clearer and thus, discourse helps them construct their own identities.

According to Norton (2013), identity is the embodiment of a person's perception of his relationship to the world around him as well as how that relationship is established across a specific time and place. This means that a person's identity will always be defined based on how he interacts with the other people in a particular place and situation through Discourse. Therefore, children's identity can be easily described based on Discourse. I will explore children's identity by using the concept of Discourse and identity in data analysis.

3. Research Approach

My research site is Meisei Summer School Project (MSSP) 2014 which is an educational project sponsored by Meisei University. Meisei University students teach

English and Chinese language with international volunteers who are from various countries. Meisei University students create a multilingual space for Japanese and Taiwanese elementary school children aiming for successful intercultural communication. Japanese and Taiwanese children interact with each other.

All the participants can choose and use the following languages: Japanese, Taiwanese and English. Their common language is English in this situation. However, Japanese children have limited English ability and almost no knowledge of Taiwanese language. On the other hand, Taiwanese students have higher competence in English and limited knowledge of the Japanese language.

I collected video-recorded data and interview data. The video data were recorded in classes and out of classes because I needed factual data that Japanese and Taiwanese elementary school children communicated with each other in a multi-cultural context. The reason I needed factual data is because such data show the children's spontaneous language use and identities in multilingual situation. Two Japanese children were chosen as interviewees after examining the video recorded data. I also collected data from Meisei university students as student-teachers in this research site.

The English classes are organized by government curriculum guidelines. According to government curriculum guidelines, the purposes of English classes are to understand language and different cultures and to nurture basic English skills. However, the English classes are different. There are public and private elementary schools in Japan. Both kinds of elementary schools' children have English classes.

4. Data Analysis

I described Japanese children's changing Discourses in Genkidama. I analyzed critical factors that led these changes are the presence of mediations. Mediations are variety of sources such as material objects, gestures and even people (Brown, 2002). Lantolf (2000), mentions that mediations are one of the important elements for language learning in sociocultural settings.

My video-recorded data indicates that upper and lower grade children frequently used mediation as a communication tool. These mediations facilitated their social interaction between Japanese and Taiwanese children.

4.1. Lower grade children's Discourse

Japanese and Taiwanese children had a monolingual Discourse. This monolingual Discourse was made by Japanese and Taiwanese children who only used their native languages to communicate within their own group on the first day. However, monolingual Discourse changed to trans-lingual Discourse on the last day.



Fig. 1. *Japanese children glancing at a Taiwanese child*

Initially, both Japanese and Taiwanese children were not communicating with each other. However, as Figure 1 indicate that one of the Japanese children was glancing at a Taiwanese child during the tasks. It means the Japanese child was interested in the Taiwanese child.

Japanese children communicated with Taiwanese children through Meisei university students and international volunteers. Japanese children used their own language. They relied on Meisei university students to communicate with Taiwanese children. This is a monolingual Discourse.

Second day of Genkidama, Japanese and Taiwanese children had tasks of walking in school and to do some tasks together. Both groups of children worked together. Nevertheless, they did not talk and Japanese children just looked at Taiwanese children during the tasks. On the third day, this group was assigned authentic tasks in the zoo. Before going to the zoo, they had tasks that are simulation. During tasks in the zoo, they were neither with Meisei University students nor with international volunteers, that is to say, Japanese and Taiwanese children needed to complete tasks by themselves. Both of the children were looking for some animals to complete their tasks.



Fig. 2. *Japanese and Taiwanese children searching for the assigned animals*

Figure 2 is part of the video-recorded data that Japanese and Taiwanese children were searching for the assigned animals. They communicated each other, even used only a few simple words for communication.

The authentic tasks helped Japanese children to communicate with Taiwanese students without help from Meisei University students or international volunteers. After visiting the zoo, Japanese children started gazing at Taiwanese children during tasks and out of class, which means both of the children experienced some authentic tasks as a transitional phase.



Fig. 3. *Preparing dance for the closing ceremony*

Figure 3 is a part of video-recorded data that was taken on the fourth day of Genkidama. The children in the picture were preparing dance for the closing ceremony. Japanese and Taiwanese children had a time to practice dancing individually. This video-recorded data indicates that Japanese students were gazing at Taiwanese children who were practicing. These data indicate that Japanese and Taiwanese students formed trans-lingual Discourse eventually. On the first day of Genkidama, both of the students had monolingual Discourse. Trans-lingual Discourse was constructed by social interactions as authentic tasks.

4.2. Mio's case

Mio's identities have changed in a week. She had identity as a passive learner on the first day. However, her identities were reconstructed by the social interactions. Finally, she obtained an identity as an active learner. Here after, I describe the reconstruction process of her identities. On the first day, all of the participants made their own name cards. After making one, Mio showed her name card to an international volunteer silently. However, she did not talk to the international volunteer. Mio was just waiting for the international volunteer to speak to her.



Fig. 4. *Mio communicating with foreigners*

Figure 4 indicates that she was interested in communicating with foreigners, however, she did not talk with Taiwanese students, and she was constantly observing and glancing at Taiwanese students.



Fig. 5. *Mio glancing at Taiwanese children*

Figure 5 clearly shows that Mio was glancing at Taiwanese children who wore yellow and white T-shirts during the task. These data show that Mio had an identity as a passive learner on the first day. She was interested in Taiwanese children. However, she did not try to talk with Taiwanese students. She talked with an international volunteer instead.

Second day, Japanese and Taiwanese students had tasks of finding coins and building cans. In addition, on the third day, the participants went to the zoo. Japanese children needed to complete their tasks such as finding certain animals with Taiwanese children. In the zoo, both groups of students worked alone together.

After visiting the zoo, Mio started gazing at Taiwanese children while doing tasks and outside classroom. Her behavior shows that her initial identities changed and started to regard their partners as human rather than objects. In addition, my interview data indicated that she communicated with Taiwanese children. She said that she communicated with Taiwanese students a little (Interview. 8, August. 2014).

As I wrote, she had an identity as a passive learner, through social interaction with Taiwanese children. She reconstructed her identity as an active learner.

The data shows the process of changing her identity from a passive learner to active learner. She seldom glanced at Taiwanese students on the first day. Through the social interaction, she started gazing at Taiwanese students and she spoke English with Taiwanese children. This is how her initial identity changed.

My data indicates that the social context motivated the children to speak with each other. The upper and lower grade children communicated with people from foreign countries. This communication arose from social interactions. I described two Japanese children's identities, which changed in a week without any difficulty. Initially, children had identities as a person who can not speak English. These identities were negotiated through Discourses. When children do not hesitate to speak a foreign language, their opportunities to communicate with non-Japanese will increase.

5. Conclusion

My analysis indicates that the Japanese children have changed their identities in one week. At the beginning of Genkidama, the lowergrader group had Discourses in which Japanese children did not talk with and kept distance from Taiwanese children. Japanese children started to use English through authentic tasks. While doing tasks with Taiwanese children, Japanese children noticed that they can communicate with non-Japanese even uttering one English word. This was the beginning of changing Japanese children's identities.

In addition, my analysis reveals that mediations are important assets in Japanese children's communication. Japanese children learned to use mediations in social interactions with ease. The social interactions enhanced children's readiness to learn English and mediations function as a communication tool. By increasing social interaction between Taiwanese children and international volunteers, Japanese children's identities had been changed, namely passive learner to active learner in the lowergrader. Discourses also gradually have changed through social interaction. Therefore, Discourses and identities were reconstructed by social interactions.

There are several limitations in this study. It is important to collect Japanese children's further background data such as their past experience, learning history, daily life and so on. These data would be able to provide another viewpoint for my analysis. In addition, this research did not have sufficient discussion on the issue of subjectivity.

By analyzing data, I realized that this research has space for discussing the issue of subjectivity. Subjectivity will be crucial element to analyze children's perspectives of English in multilingual space. Although Identity and subjectivity are critical in SLA, these two concepts have been discussed ambiguously (Norton and McKinney, 2011). For further research, I will explore both identity and subjectivity by empirical data in order to understand both concepts clearly.

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