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Changing understanding of roles and identities in second language learning and use

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Interest in pragmatics has been growing recently in the study of second language acquisition (SLA). Pragmatics has been defined by Crystal (1997: 301) as the study of language:

> … from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication.

Researchers in SLA have traditionally been more interested in cognitive processes; in understanding how the 'input' that language learners receive becomes 'intake' contributing to second language knowledge, such that learners can produce 'output' in their target language. Increasingly, though, SLA researchers are calling for greater sensitivity to the range of roles that second language users may wish to play out in their second language, and for SLA theorists to avoid building their theories on narrow assumptions about second language discourse roles (Firth and Wagner, 1997 and 2007). In this enterprise, researchers are drawing on a range of work in pragmatics, in particular the study of politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and the analysis of conversation (Sacks, 1992).

In what follows, I highlight some of the issues that have arisen in this debate as they have emerged in some recent journal articles. First, however, I summarise briefly the 'traditional' SLA approach to understanding how language use links to language acquisition. It was Steven Krashen (1981, 1985), who first hypothesised the role of simplified 'input' in SLA, following on from the work of Catherine Snow and fellow researchers (Snow and Ferguson, 1977) in first language acquisition. The latter had highlighted how anglophone mothers typically simplify speech to their infants in ways that might be argued to promote language acquisition. For second language acquisition, Krashen established the wonderfully simplistic mantra that 'comprehensible input' triggers 'acquisition' of a second language; in other words, once language is understood in some general way, aided by guessing from context, second language acquisition will happen unconsciously in the same way as first language acquisition, so long as a learner is not overly anxious or demotivated.

Subsequent researchers such as Michael Long (1983) set out to understand in more detail what makes language use comprehensible (and therefore 'good for acquisition') and concluded that 'interaction', not just linguistic simplification, was key. The important features of this 'interaction' were requests for clarification,

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repetition, and self and other correction and Long suggested that these occurred naturally in discourse as speakers sought to 'negotiate meaning'. Long's work stimulated a mass of research on the degree to which different types of interaction or pedagogic tasks might generate these desired interactional features, and he has now updated his 'interaction hypothesis' (Long, 1996) to claim that through negotiation of meaning, learners will have their attention drawn to features of language that they might not previously have noticed. As a result of this, they will be more likely to acquire these features. This paradoxically seems to suggest that a key ingredient in any effective language learning environment is opportunities for *mis*understanding since it is through negotiating misunderstanding that learners 'notice' new forms while still focusing on meaning.

While this argument has its logic, particularly within a focus on the cognitive processes involved in second language acquisition, researchers with a stronger interest in the social realities of interpersonal communication have pointed out that it takes no account of how people typically conduct themselves in – and indeed define themselves through - linguistic interaction. One of the seminal works in pragmatics, Brown and Levinson (1987), suggests that we can understand interpersonal language use by considering the notion of 'face'. We all seek to have recognised our 'positive face', i.e. our positive self-image, and our 'negative face', our claim to act autonomously, free from imposition. Typically, we do this cooperatively in that we try to mitigate anything which might threaten our own or an interlocutor's face. This view may help to explain why many of us find direct 'bald' criticism to another person's 'face' hard to do. In these circumstances, we may undertake extensive 'facework' or 'redressive action', emphasising how, e.g. the critical view is *only* our view – others might see things differently, or how the critical view is being expressed in order to help the other person who has really does have the capability to do great things!

There may be different expectations of the extent to which the 'face' of different participants can acceptably be threatened by other participants. This typically depends on the assumed power relationships between them. If we accept that requesting clarification is a face-threatening act both to one's own and the interlocutor's face (the implication is 'I'm not competent' and 'you're not clear') and that correcting is clearly face-threatening to one's interlocutor, then the Brown and Levinson framework suggests it is unrealistic to expect second language speakers to engage naturally in 'negotiation of meaning', whatever its usefulness for learning. Of course, the Brown and Levinson assumptions can be overridden, but they will only be overridden if this is felt to be appropriate by the participants. This in turn depends on participant goals in the conversation and how participants define themselves as having 'membership' of different socially-defined categories (e.g. 'learner', 'teacher', 'music-buff', 'cat-lover'). For negotiation of meaning to take place, learners need to 'orient' to themselves (i.e. define their role in conversation) as 'learners', and this might limit the relationships they might wish to establish with their interlocutors through the subtle and complex means of talk. Pauline Foster's work (Foster, 1998; Foster and Snyder Ohta, 2005) on how small groups of UK-based EFL students in fact interact in their second language found very little evidence of the negotiation of meaning hypothesised by Long. This suggests that negotiation of meaning may not be such a natural feature of interactions involving second language speakers; such participants, it seems, do not want to behave simply as learners, and indeed, a number of researchers have argued that it is highly reductionist for SLA

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researchers to limit second language speakers to such a role (Firth and Wagner, 1997 and 2007).

However, if 'negotiation of meaning' in interaction is important, it is part of the role of a second language *teacher* to help those in the role of second language *learners* to engage in such interactive behaviour. A recent action research project by Diane Naughton (2006), working with Spanish university learners of English explores how teachers might help learners engage more actively in negotiation of meaning by adopting more active roles in pair and group work. Naughton noted that in monolingual foreign language classrooms very few opportunities for 'misunderstanding' – and thus, arguably for negotiation of meaning - arise, however much pair and group work a teacher might set up for her class. Students typically revert back to their L1 to sort out any misunderstandings. Furthermore, repair (self and other-correction, asking for clarification) is likely to be experienced as 'face threatening or detrimental to social relations' (Naughton, 2006: 170). Thus, she argues, 'special attention must be paid to the construction of a classroom environment that encourages interaction patterns that are conducive to L2/FL development' (*op.cit.:* 171). This environment needs to be cooperative but also focused on learning. Classrooms typically may be focused on learning but *not* on learners cooperating to help each other learn, while natural interaction, i.e. conversation, may be cooperative but is unlikely, as we suggested above, to be focused on learning.

In order to overcome this, Naughton set out to train a group of her students explicitly in what she calls cooperative strategies: (1) asking follow-up questions, (2) requesting and giving clarification, (3) self and other repair and (4) requesting and giving help. The students learned to think of questions to build on another's assertions and to use phrases such as '*Sorry, what does X mean?*' or '*Sorry, I think you need to say …*' or '*How do you say X…?*' and to answer '*I think the word's X… or something like that*'. Note the pragmatics of these phrases in the use of the apology '*sorry'* and the indirect marking of *I think … you need to …* and *…. or something like that'*: these are strategies for negotiating face-threatening territory.

In a classic experimental design, Naughton compared the extent of any increase in negotiation of meaning from pre-test to post-test in the trained group versus a control group, who had simply had further opportunities for unstructured group work. Her results showed a significant increase in the experimental group, but not in the control group, on strategies 1, 2 and 4. On strategy 3, there were significant increases in both the experimental and the control group, suggesting that the increase was not due to the strategy training. The greatest increases for the experimental group came in strategies 1 and 4. It could be argued that these types of interaction are the most amenable to explicit training.

Naughton's study clearly abandons the notion that language learning will automatically take place through 'natural' communication in the classroom. Instead, it accepts that learners may need training in the skills of making the most of interaction opportunities for *learning*, since this may require them to go against 'the prevailing axioms of conversational behaviour' (*op.cit.:* 178). Learners thus need to learn how to learn from groupwork. Naughton situates her work not just in terms of Long's updated interaction hypothesis, but also within sociocultural theory, which claims that any kind of learning is socially constructed, i.e. takes place through

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interaction between people. In this, her work echoes that of Neil Mercer (1995, 2000), who developed and researched classroom-based activities promoting 'language as a tool for thinking collectively' (Mercer, 2000: 149) particularly for general primary education. Interestingly, Mercer found that school pupils typically needed some kind of 'training' to help them understand how to learn through talk.

It is a tenet of conversational analysis that participant roles in informal verbal interaction are not necessarily fixed at the outset but are typically constructed by participants through the on-going discourse (Huth and Taleghanni-Nazam, 2006: 57). It may be dangerous to assume, therefore, as Long has appeared to do, that there are fixed discouse roles for second language users in second language interaction and to suggest that a given discourse pattern is theoretically causative in the acquisition process. Recent research by Hosada (2006) shows through the micro-analysis of naturally occurring conversations how L1 and L2 speakers of Japanese 'situate themselves' in changing ways in relation to each other and their relative language expertise. Hosada's article clearly questions the assumption that 'negotiation of meaning' is inherent or even likely in native-speaker to non native-speaker interactions. It confirms again that '… second language speakers and their interlocutors rarely orient to linguistic proficiency during interaction' (Husoda, 2006: 28). When they do, this is usually triggered by the L2 speaker displaying 'linguistic trouble', either by indicating their uncertainty over their expression, by pausing or by explicitly asking for help. But even this does not mean that an L1 interlocutor will immediately re-orient to the L2 interlocutor as a 'novice' in the conversation. Hosada's research seeks to challenge the notion that the roles of 'native-speaker' and 'non-native speaker' are fixed or even prominent for the participants in these interactions. Rather, he shows how orientation to roles shifts during the conversation. In the conversations he analyses, the L2 and L1 speakers swap the roles of 'expert language user' between them; at one point, an English speaker cannot find a Japanese word he is looking for, but at another, the Japanese speaker becomes the 'non-native speaker' as he tries to find the English word that the English speaker is attempting in Japanese.

Hosada's article shows how speakers construct meaning in interaction based on perceived membership of different social categories (e.g. 'native speaker' v. 'non-native speaker). 'Membershipping' is also central to Richards' (2006) analysis of how teachers orient themselves in classroom discourse and in particular, how this relates to the type of linguistic engagement by their students. Teachers and students may shift in and out of their 'membership category' of 'teachers' and 'students', and Richards shows how subtle and sensitive negotiation of this may need to be. In particular, he discusses (*op.cit.:* 62) a classroom moment when a teacher fails to pick up on a student's shift of membership orientation. In answer to a question from another student '*Do you like being a father?*' which has been introduced by the teacher to elicit the tag response ' *Yes, I do/No, I don't*', a student replies *not* as a student but – quite understandably - as a father: '*Yes, I (pause) (proudly) I am er father of four'*. The teacher however asks the questioner to ask the question again, resulting in confusion from the student answering, who attempts '*I like being to be* ….' and then gives up. Finally, the teacher models the 'correct' answer: '*Yes I do. I like being a father'*. Readers may sense the deflation of the student, who has been membershipped back into the class of 'student' at a moment where he was about to share personal information with his class from his perspective as a father.

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Richards' point here is in fact *not* that teachers should always to respond to student membership switches, but they should be aware of what might be achieved by doing so. One of the problems facing language teachers is that the typical pattern of teacher-student interaction in classrooms – often referred to as IRF (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975), i.e. initiation (by the teacher), response (by the student) and feedback (by the teacher), can be highly restrictive and may not give students opportunities to practise taking part in more pragmatically complex interactions where they learn to negotiate talk more confidently. Richards discusses a contrasting example to the above interaction, where a teacher in a Japanese EFL classroom memberships himself as a 'student' by asking his students to teach him the Japanese equivalent of an English proverb. This does result in extensive and varied interaction within the class. Something similar happens in an example from a Taiwanese EFL classroom. Here, in response to a student's assertion that '*In Taiwan, boys like the swastika*', a teacher steps out of 'teacher' role and into what Richards suggests is the membership category of 'concerned-Westerner-with-priviledged-knowledge-of-cultural-and-historical-connotations' and comments '*But I feel they don't really understand*'. This challenges the student to assert his right to claim understanding of the meaning of the swastika, and there follows an interaction of 15 turns. Richards' point (2006: 71) is that this interaction provides practice in the tricky business of conversation: 'Challenges need to be dealt with …, repairs strategically formulated, definitions negotiated and listeners brought onside …'

But Richards is sensitive to the dangers that membership-switching by teachers may represent: these are practical, pedagogic and moral. Under practical difficulties, he mentions that encouraging fluidity of roles in the classroom could undermine the teacher's central role in maintaining discipline and focus, and additionally could require target language competence beyond the level of many non-native speaker teachers. Pedagogically, he highlights the feeling of many teachers – and indeed students themselves – that communication outside the institutional membership categories is not what they are in the classroom to do. Furthermore, there may be moral reasons why speaking outside one's institutional role may be inappropriate in the classroom; for example, if one's personal views are incompatible with the teacher role or with the ambient teaching culture. These are tricky areas to negotiate, particularly for new teachers who may need to develop their sense of their own classroom identity. In this context, the concepts from conversation analysis may well provide useful thinking tools for teacher reflection.

Generally, studies using conceptual tools from pragmatics tend to be descriptive, rather than prescriptive, and this may generate impatience on the part of the hard-pressed classroom teacher on the look-out for good classroom recipes. But perhaps the value of pragmatics is to remind us of the complexities of negotiating linguistic environments and to highlight the subtlety with which we define our roles in talk. This in my view can increase our sensitivity to how we create effective relationships through talk and certainly make language teachers aware of different communication strategies. The bigger debate, however, is how we build effective *learning* through talk. The recent 'social turn' (Block, 2003) in second language acquisition studies drawing on pragmatics, but also on socio-cultural theory (Firth and Wagner, 1997 and 2007) seems to helping researchers build a more careful contextualisation for the relationship between 'linguistic input' and second language development and to remind us that second language users are individual

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interlocutors wishing to establish a range of roles and identities through talk, rather than merely being conceptualised as 'learners'.

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