Learning in Tandem: Integrating Learning Tasks and Online Resources in Collaborative Japanese-Finnish E-Learning

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The purpose of this presentation is to outline a Japanese-Finnish e-learning pilot project implemented in Japanese and Finnish language courses in Finland and Japan respectively. Collaborating university language courses, a Japanese course in Finland and a Finnish course in Japan and their instructors will be involved in planning and coordinating learning tasks, which the course participants will be expected to tackle in tandem, Finnish-speaking learners of Japanese in Finland collaborating with their Japanese-speaking peers and learners of Finnish in Japan.

This presentation pays particular attention to a variety of tasks, which both target groups could be expected to benefit from while learning their respective languages, paying particular attention to questions pertaining to socio-pragmatic aspects. Tasks will range from simple email or discussion forum questions on preselected topics (e.g. naming practices, to be supported by existing online statistical information) to mini-surveys, interview projects, and collection, presentation and simple analysis of online examples of language use (e.g. related to the pragmatics of pitch accent and intonation or to age-specific language use, including collection of data from online forums centering on various representations of Japanese pop culture in both target languages).

Although the language of online communication in beginners' or intermediate level courses may partially have to be restricted to the common lingua franca, English, it is expected that the kinds of tasks outlined in the presentation will contribute to the learners' socio-pragmatic knowledge and understanding of the target language and culture and thus function as bridges to more 'academic' approaches to sociolinguistics and discourse analysis.

1. Learning and instruction of Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL)

Prior to outlining the parameters and goals of the described tandem learning project, it is necessary to touch upon two contextualizing questions: What does one learn when one learns Japanese (JLF)? and What does one teach when one teaches Japanese (JFL)? In a recent review article Mori and Mori [6] list the following core areas: vocabulary and kanji (Chinese characters), interlanguage grammar, reading, writing, speaking and listening – most of these areas pertaining to what is generally referred to as language 'skills'. Added to such a framework in which the target language is seen as a 'system' to be learned and acquired are interlanguage pragmatics, language socialization and conceptualization of 'culture' in language learning, i.e. "unique features of Japanese language and social contexts" [6]. Leaving aside the somewhat problematic discussion of "uniqueness", it can nevertheless be noted that the latter areas extend beyond the vision of language as an abstract system, taking into account language users, cultural context as well as interconnections between language and society.

The second question can be approached by examining recent educational materials targeting JFL instructors, published by The Japan Foundation (Japanese-Language Teaching Methods Series 2006-2008) [4]. This 14-volume series covers the following areas, ranging from profession-specific practical questions to the linguistic description of Japanese, core language skills and coverage of cultural topics: instructor's role, course design, speech sounds, Japanese and Chinese characters (kana and kanji), vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, reading, writing, beginner's Japanese, intermediate and advanced Japanese, assessment, didactics, teaching material production, "topics on Japan" (nihon jijoo) and Japanese culture. The latter two areas are explained to pertain to:

- information on social life and aspects: human relationships, life (style), social infrastructure, customs;
- information on Japan: traditions, arts, sports, humanities (e.g. history, religion, education, economy), nature; and
- basic level examples: cultural columns, Japan-related vocabulary (e.g. Fuji-san mountain, shinkansen bullet train), authentic materials.

Although the importance of variety and variation in the abovementioned (cultural) topic areas is emphasized in the series, in reality one often encounters relatively stereotypical examples of "unique" features of Japan and Japanese culture in widely available JFL textbooks. In such circumstances one of the aims of the current tandem learning project is to overcome such stereotypes by

- providing students in both countries with additional sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic information and statistics concerning the target language;
- requiring students to collect and analyze relevant examples and complement their knowledge with description of personal experiences; and
- involving students in mutual dialogue across national borders at an early stage (also using English as lingua franca if necessary).

Due to space restrictions, only limited concrete examples can be mentioned here. Differences of 'male' and 'female' speech, to name one, are a common topic in conversational JFL learning materials and short dialogue examples are often provided in both 'male' and 'female' registers. The latter forms, including for example 'feminine' sentence-final particles, discourse markers and pronominal forms, tend to be exaggerated to the point that they prompted a female Japanese MA student course assistant in Finland to spontaneously remark: "Well, actually I never speak like this and neither do any my friends." Here I would like to suggest that rather than lamenting on the stereotypical nature of such language learning materials, examples of this type can easily be expanded to a more scientific discussion, ranging from gender and language variation to language consciousness and attitudes, to prescriptivism and language planning, and, in this particular case, even to yakuwarigo or 'role language' (fictionalized orality in Japanese literature and popular culture) [12]. Other similar expandable topics could include for example dialectal forms, accompanied with online dialect samples (e.g. weather forecasts and quizzes) and dialect distribution and perceptual dialect maps, thus connecting directly to the areas of geographic variation, perceptual dialectology (non-linguists' perceptions of language variety), language attitudes, language/dialect contact, language change, language vitality and so forth.

2. 'Sociolinguistic competence'?

Albeit from a linguistic perspective the abovementioned areas, covering a wide array of variation, fall directly within the field of sociolinguistics (and dialectology), it should be noted that the term 'sociolinguistic competence' has been used in a rather prescriptive sense in foreign language pedagogy, namely in reference to

- "the ability to interpret the social meaning of the choice of linguistic varieties and to use language with the appropriate social meaning for the communication situation" [9] (emphasis added); and
- being "able to speak appropriately in the right company" [10] (emphasis added).

LINCS [5] on the other hand links 'sociolinguistic competence' to "differences in communicative styles", hence raising the question of whether or how the aforementioned sociolinguistic information and analysis could (or should) be differentiated terminologically from 'strategic/discourse/communicative competence', while integrated in foreign language learning.

Due to limited space, the development of related pedagogical terminology and concepts cannot be elaborated here, but the following examples suffice to demonstrate that a number of terms have been coined and used in a relatively confusing manner. (i) 'Communicative competence' has been used in reference to grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic and discourse competence, i.e. testifying of knowledge of the language code (e.g. sociocultural rules of use in a particular context, use of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies, ability to achieve coherence and cohesion) (Canale & Swain 1980 & Savignon 1983 in [14]; emphasis added) [7]. (ii) 'Communicative language ability' is another term used in reference to language competence (organizational competence and pragmatic, i.e. illocutionary and sociolinguistic, competence), strategic competence (use of 'language competence elements' in negotiation of meaning) and psychomotor skills. The concept 'sociolinguistic competence', by contrast, seems to have developed further via sociocultural to intercultural competence – the descriptor 'sociolinguistic' in foreign language learning context, again, being employed prescriptively in reference to knowledge of the sociolinguistic conventions for performing language functions appropriately in a given context (Bachman 1987 & 1990 in [14]; emphasis added). In the same vein 'sociocultural competence' as well seems to denote knowledge of how to express appropriate messages within the social and cultural context of communication in which they are produced (Celce-Murcia et al. 1995 & Savignon 2001 in [14]; emphasis added). In recent years it is the term 'intercultural (communicative) competence', which, again, is used in an almost identical sense, referring to "the ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures" (Meyer 1991 in [14]; emphasis added). Finally, to conclude this quick overview of terminological evolution (and confusion), 'cultural and non-verbal communicative factors' have been suggested to include sociocultural knowledge of the target language community, knowledge of dialects and cross-cultural awareness as well as non-verbal signals, emphasizing "cultural differences and similarities" [14] (emphasis added).

In view of the definitions outlined above, a question arises: Are the idealistic learning targets of 'sociocultural knowledge' and 'cross-cultural awareness' in fact biased towards categorical processes and forms? Are language instructors therefore to focus on "rules" and differences, for example through the presentation of critical incidents and examples of cross-cultural misunderstandings? In JFL instruction and research the above discussion becomes evident in a strong tradition in interlanguage pragmatics – perhaps to the detriment of sociolinguistic knowledge of the target language community/communities. I would therefore like to suggest in this paper that, from a combined language educator's and (socio)linguist's perspective, it would be more desirable to conceive the JFL speaker as a multi-dimensional language user, who could (and should) first be made aware of and then, to a certain extent, also acquire (some) native speaker patterns of variability. In addition to this, language learning should quite naturally support the learner's self-concept as well as offer a means for self-expression.

3. 'Sociolinguistic competence 3.0'

In contrast to the terminology summarized in Section 2, the approach adopted in the described tandem learning project aspires towards a "more connected, open and intelligent" language learner [11], echoing the following SIL definition: "Sociolinguistics is a very broad discipline and the term sociolinguistic competence could be used much more broadly than it is here, where we have restricted its use to refer to the recognition and use of appropriate varieties of language" [9] (emphasis added). Language learning is linked to domains of sociolinguistic research, in the case of Japanese as the target language to the fields of language varieties, language behaviour, 'language life' (gengo seikatsu), language contact, language change, language consciousness, language acquisition and language planning, to name a few [8]. While sharing experiences and (well-designed) analyses, language in the tandem project is conceptualized as "Saying, Doing and Being" [3] and collaborative learning tasks function as bridges to more 'academic' approaches to sociolinguistics and discourse analysis – thus breaking down the "silos" of foreign language learning and linguistics.

To give a few examples, course tasks in the tandem project include: (i) naming practices (given and family names in Japan and Finland, e.g. Inquire about your language partner's given and family name(s) by email (or on Facebook) and report in class; statistical and related information via Moodle open-source learning platform); (ii) unconventional scripts (Tranter [13] discusses gyarumoji 'gal characters', but what kind of chat/email slang or acronyms do you generally use in Finnish or Japanese? Provide 5-10 representative examples with a brief analysis. Include a note on the targeted recipients/readers). These tasks connect directly for example to the discussion of 'language life' and functions of substandard forms (e.g. age-preferential expressions).

4. Rising to the challenge? 'Late-Modern subjectivities' and 'super-diversity'

One of the goals of the described approach is to offer a novel perspective to a "sociolinguistics of mobile resources and not of immobile languages" [1] in foreign language learning in today's globalized and interconnected world. As Blommaert and Backus (2012: 1) put it, "mobile subjects engage with a broad variety of groups, networks and communities, and their language resources are consequently learned through a wide variety of trajectories, tactics and technologies, ranging from fully formal language learning to entirely informal 'encounters' with language." Such resources will also make use of "unfinished, truncated repertoires" [1] and "different learning modes lead to very different degrees of knowledge of language" [2]. Diverse needs and language exposure realities, ranging from "encounters" with language (e.g. slang, single word, recognizing language) to "specialized" language learning (e.g. "SDL lect") and (more) "comprehensive" language learning [2] offer challenges to current and future foreign language instruction, and therefore novel modes of learning, such as polycentric learning environments and embedded learning, are called for. This presentation offers a glimpse of what piloting polycentricity could mean in practice.

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