Scaffolding in the Classroom Discourse of Japanese Learners of English as a Foreign Language

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Introduction

Classroom discourse analysis is a systematic description of teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions that occur in actual institutional environments. Empirical analysis of discursive interactions in English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) classrooms is of particular interest to those involved in ESL/EFL education for its theoretical and pedagogical potential to reveal still unclear processes involved in second language (L2) learning. This paper analyzes naturally occurring data of interaction in an EFL classroom at a Japanese university and examines what actually happens in the classroom and what features of classroom interaction may contribute to learners’ L2 learning, with a focus on scaffolding.

In the past two decades increasing attention has been given to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of mental activity (Valsiner & Van der Veer, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wertsch, 1985), and vigorous research has been carried out on various aspects of mediated second language learning (see Donato, 2000; Dunn & Lantolf, 1998; Ellis, 2003; Hall & Verplaetse, 2000; Hall and Walsh, 2002; Lantolf, 2000a, 2000b; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995; Swain, 2000).

Mediation, which is a fundamental concept in sociocultural theory, refers to the introduction of physical tools or symbolic signs into an activity that links people to the physical and mental world (Lantolf, 1994). From a sociocultural perspective, not only does human mental activity determine the nature of social world, but also the social world determines how we regulate our mental processes (Lantolf, 2000b). L2 learning, too, is a mediated mental activity, which emphasizes the role of teacher, learner, task, and learning environment for L2 learners in developing their language abilities. In the
present study I will explore how mediated learning is performed by scaffolded assistance by the teacher and peer learners in a L2 classroom. I will first review previous research on scaffolding in L2 classroom interactions (Donato, 1994; Ohta, 2001) and discuss repair in conversation (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). The second part of this paper will be devoted to the analysis of scaffolded assistance with the following research questions:

1. How does the teacher provide scaffolded assistance to learners in an EFL classroom?
2. How do learners provide scaffolded assistance to one another?

**Scaffolding**

Scaffolding in sociocultural theory refers to the process by which an expert assists a novice to achieve a goal or solve a problem that the novice cannot achieve or solve alone. A scaffold, according to the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary On-Line, is "a temporary or movable platform for workers (as bricklayers, painters, or miners)" or "a supporting framework." Because a scaffold is a temporary framework, it is removed when a part of the building is completed. When the part is completed, the construction comes into a new stage and a new set of scaffolding is put up. In learning, scaffolding is mediation provided by an expert that allows a novice to learn new knowledge and skills. According to Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) in developmental psychology, scaffolded assistance is characterized by the following six features:

1. recruiting interest in the task,
2. simplifying the task,
3. maintaining pursuit of the goal,
4. marking critical features and discrepancies between what has been produced and the ideal solution,
5. controlling frustration during problem solving, and
6. demonstrating an idealized version of the act to be performed.

Ohta (2001) argues that scaffolded assistance can be provided by not only a teacher or more competent peer, but also a peer of equal linguistic level, because even equal peers will have different strengths and weaknesses in their abilities, play different interactional roles, and employ different working memory and selective attention in achieving communicative tasks. In her study on classroom learning by Japanese as a foreign language students, Ohta (2001) reported that peer interaction allows learners to learn vocabulary by helping each other in the search for appropriate words or suggesting alternative words. In phonology, learners improve their pronunciation by self-correction or by other-correction by peers who notice their pronunciation problems. As for grammar, learners co-construct grammatical forms which they are not yet able to produce independently and notice not only their peer’s errors but also their own grammatical errors, thus benefiting from the syntactic reformulation process. Learners also develop pragmatic and discursive abilities when they appropriate with peer interlocutors different interactional styles that the teacher uses in the classroom.

Moreover, collective scaffolding, as demonstrated by Donato (1994), suggests that more than two learners engaging in group work can provide assistance to peer learners and collaboratively construct target linguistic forms. His analysis of protocols by three American learners of French as a foreign language revealed that the learners synthesized each other’s partial knowledge and arrived at the
correct syntactic construction in group work. The examples by Ohta (2001) and Donato (1994) given above suggest the potential of peer scaffolding to allow learners to simultaneously develop their own linguistic ability and their peer's linguistic ability in collaborative learning.

**Repair**

According to Schegloff et al. (1977), repair in conversation refers to participants' dealing with the whole range of trouble sources or repairables such as incorrect word selection, slips of the tongue, mishearings, or misunderstandings. Repair includes correction as replacement of error but is not contingent on error and may involve change when no error is evident. Repair is also not limited to replacement and may not replace anything. Initiation and completion of repair consists of four distinct sequences:

1. Self-initiated self-repair is both initiated and carried out by the speaker of the trouble source.
2. Other-initiated self-repair is carried out by the speaker of the trouble source but initiated by the recipient.
3. Self-initiated other-repair is initiated by the speaker of a trouble source and carried out by the recipient.
4. Other-initiated other-repair is both initiated and carried out by the recipient(s) of a trouble source turn.

Self-initiation of repair occurs within the same turn construction unit (TCU)\(^1\) containing the trouble source, at the transition relevance place (TRP)\(^2\) immediately after the TCU containing the trouble source, or in the third to the trouble source turn. Other-initiation occurs overwhelmingly at one main position, that is, in the turn following the turn containing the trouble source.

Self-repair is preferred because the structural features of the repair system are skewed in favor of self-repair, that is, there exist more positions for self-initiation to occur than other-initiation, opportunities for self-initiation precede other-initiation, self-initiation by and large results in repair-completion, and other-initiation usually locates the repairable rather than corrects it. In addition to the organizational preference for self-initiation, a preference for self-correction exists because opportunities for self-initiation come before other-initiation, self-initiation usually yields self-correction, and other-initiation also usually yields self-correction. Preference in conversation analysis does not pertain to individual positive attitudes or inclinations towards a behavioral pattern or way of speaking, but indicates phenomenal prevalence or unmarkedness in the organization of conversational repair. However, dispreferred repair, that is, self-initiated other-repair, other-initiated self-repair, and other-initiated other-repair, is thought to play an important role in learners' L2 development in the classroom. I will discuss this point by examining the instances of these types of repair later in this paper.

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1 A TCU refers to a minimal unit out of which a turn can be constructed. It is determined by syntactic features and identified by prosodic and intonational features (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974).
2 A TRP refers to the end of a TCU where speaker change may occur (Sacks et al., 1974).
THE DATA

The data analyzed for the present study are based on a 90-minute video- and audio-taped class. There were eight learners registered for this EFL class, comprising two females and six males of mixed majors and years at a university near Tokyo. The participants involved in this study consented to data collection by signing informed consent forms, and are referred to by pseudonyms. The class was an elective English course taught by a Japanese teacher of English and met once a week for 90 minutes with the aim of improving learners’ general English communicative abilities, as well as skills and strategies specific to the TOEIC test. The course was planned to focus primarily on listening in the first semester and reading in the second semester, using a TOEIC preparation textbook and an accompanying audiotape (Lougheed, 1996). The class recorded for this study was the tenth listening session in the first semester.

The 90 minutes of data were transcribed for analysis using a simplified version of the Jefferson transcription system (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984), from the audio and video tape (see Appendix for transcription conventions). For talk in Japanese, an idiomatic translation is provided after each speaker’s turn.

RESULTS

Teacher Scaffolding

The data exhibit scaffolding by the teacher affords potential assistance to learners in learning focal phonological, syntactic, and lexical forms. I will present six fragments and examine how the teacher provides the learners with scaffolded assistance by initiating and/or completing repair in the classroom interaction.

Self-Initiated Self-Repair

The first two fragments include self-initiated self-repair in the first position, that is, repair within or immediately after the TUC containing the trouble source. In fragment 1, the class was engaging in a listening activity using an audiotape. Kenji (K) could not catch “in the” in the sentence “Do you make any in the Philippines?” and reproduced it as “Do you make any and Philippines?” at line 1.

(1) Modified Question
1 K do you make any and Philippines.

2 T do you make any and Philippines, does it make sense?

3 K "make sense?"

4→ T does it- do you understand the sentence?

5 K sentence? no.
The teacher (T) asks Kenji, "does it make sense?" at line 2, but he responds by muttering "make sense?" in the subsequent turn. The teacher then reissues the same question but, perhaps recognizing that Kenji does not know what "make sense" means, terminates it in the middle ("does it-"), and immediately offers a modified question, "do you understand the sentence?" and thereby draws Kenji's attention to the meaning of the sentence he thought he had heard on the tape and reproduced at line 1.

In fragment 2, the teacher code-switches to her L1 to reinforce a complex L2 grammar instruction. Prior to this fragment, the teacher has explained the syntactic pattern of [want/have/like]+[noun]+[past participle], which had confused the learners in the question on the tape, "Would you like the oil checked, too?" The learners could not identify the syntactic pattern in the question, perhaps because the word-final /t/ in the word "checked" was blended with the word-initial /t/ in the following word "too," and the sentence sounded like "Would you like the oil check, too?" At line 1, the teacher explains that "would like" means "want," then presents the problem sentence by changing the part "would you like" to "do you want" at line 2, and provides the meaning of the sentence in L1 at line 3.

(2) L1 Scaffolding
1 T so would you like, would you like means do you want.

2 do you want the oil checked.

3→ oiru o chekku shi te hoshii desu ka?
oil O check do PT want POL Q
'Would you like the oil checked?'

4 do you want your hair cut?

5→ katto shi te hoshii desu ka?
cut do PT want POL Q
'Would you like your hair cut?'

6 ok? >by somebody else.<

7 K do- do- would you like your hair cutted? cut?

Further, at line 4, the teacher presents another example of the target structure [want]+[noun]+[past participle] in an interrogative form similar to the sentence at line 2 and again provides the meaning of the sentence in L1 at line 5. In such cases, L1 scaffolding helps learners with a complex grammar instruction, and we see evidence of this in uptake by Kenji at line 7. He has synthesized the sentence "Would you like your hair cut?" from the original sentence "Would you like the oil checked?" and the second model sentence "Do you want your hair cut?" In addition, his attempt to use the form "cutted" in comparison with "checked" shows his understanding that a past participle is
used in the target structure.

**Self-initiated Other-Repair**

Fragment 3 displays repair initiated by a learner and completed by the teacher. The learners were again struggling to catch a quickly pronounced phrase "in the" in the sentence "I visited my aunt in the hospital last night." Noriko (N) gave an answer "in the," another learner offered an alternative answer "on the," and Kenji "at." Then, Noriko explains how she solves a listening problem when she cannot clearly hear it.

(3) Intersubjectivity
1       N    I- I couldn't hear in the:

2        but (.) "nan daroo" I- I write- (.) ah nan daroo I used my top down=
          what wonder                  oh what wonder

        'I- I couldn't hear in the, but (.) what's that? I- I write- (.) oh what do you
        call it, I used my top down="

3        T    =umm knowledge. yeah, that's the way you do.

At line 2, Noriko searches for an appropriate expression with a pause followed by "nan daroo" (What's that? or What do you call it?), and then cuts off the word "I-" and "write-." After another short pause and search "ah nan daroo," she carries out repair in the same turn "I used my top down (X)." Noriko's repeated search invites the teacher's co-participant completion. At line 3, Noriko's utterance is latched over and completed by the teacher, who produces "umm knowledge." Since the interactive use of top-down and bottom-up strategies was one of the learning objectives of this course, the teacher had instructed the class how to use their phonological, morphological, grammatical, and social knowledge when they could not comprehend incoming sounds. The repair initiated by the learner and its co-constructive completion by the teacher shows that the repair solution was projected\(^3\) by the hearer and the meaning was intersubjectively\(^4\) shared between the two parties.

**Other-Initiated Self-Repair**

Fragment 4 shows scaffolding with repair initiated by the teacher and completed by the learner who produced the trouble source. In this fragment, the teacher provides corrective feedback to mark a discrepancy between what has been produced by the learner and the expected outcome, "I thought this was the smoking section."

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\(^3\) Projectability refers to the capacity to anticipate when and how the turn will be constructed. By projecting the current turn, the next speaker can start at or near a possible completion of the turn (Sacks et al., 1974).

\(^4\) Intersubjectivity refers to sharing understanding that is "brought into focus by one participant and jointly attended by both participants" in a discursive interaction (Rommetveit, 1985).
(4) Corrective Feedback with Repetition and Metalinguistic Information
1    R    I thought this smoking section.
2    T    I thought this (.) you need a verb.
3    R    is?
4→  T    is? almost, but (.) this is thought. not think. I=
5→  R    =ah was.

At line 1, Ryo (R) reproduces the target sentence as “I thought this smoking section.” In the subsequent turn, the teacher repeats the beginning part of the sentence and, after a short pause, points out that Ryo’s clause lacks a verb. Ryo tentatively provides the verb “is.” At line 4, the teacher repeats his answer and states it is almost correct but not quite. After a short pause, the teacher supplies metalinguistic information by contrasting “thought” and “think.” When the teacher starts saying, “I...” Ryo latches onto the teacher’s turn and produces the change-of-state token “ah” that shows his noticing and a reformulation of the target verb. Although preference for self-correction is marked in ordinary conversation, other-correction, particularly correction of a learner’s trouble source initiated by the teacher, frequently occurs in institutional settings.

Other-Initiated Other-Repair

In fragment 5, repair of the learner’s trouble source in phonology is initiated and carried out by the teacher. Pronunciation errors may often be overlooked in ordinary conversation unless they result in miscommunication; however, errors are more likely to be corrected in a language classroom. Prior to this fragment, the class was discussing the kinds of gasoline used for cars. Kenji, who does not drive, did not know much about unleaded gas and asked the other students whether unleaded gas is environmentally friendly or not.

(5) Corrective Feedback in Pronunciation
1    K    generally speaking, generally speaking kind to earth.
2
3    K    unleaded=
       /ʌnliːd/  
4→  T    =unleaded.  
       /ʌnliːd/
5    K    ah unlead[ed] gas is.  
       /ʌnliːd/
6    T    [umm]
After Kenji utters "generally speaking" twice and an adjectival phrase "kind to earth" at line 1, there is no response from other participants but a silence for two seconds. Then, at line 3, Kenji postpositionally provides the subject "unleaded (gas)" for the utterance he produced at line 1, but with a wrong pronunciation. The teacher latches onto his turn and supplies correction at line 4. In the subsequent turn, Kenji produces a change-of-state token "ah" and the corrected subject and verb with which he completes his utterance (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>line 1</th>
<th>Generally speaking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>line 5</td>
<td>generally speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>line 5</td>
<td>is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>line 5</td>
<td>unleaded gas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>line 5</td>
<td>kind to earth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Kenji was popular among his classmates for making puns and jokes about English pronunciation. When he utters, “tsuna is tsuna is” at line 4, the teacher offers a candidate “rope” in a rising intonation to co-complete his utterance (“Tsuna” also means rope in Japanese). Kenji acknowledges the repair initiated and completed by the teacher with a repetition at line 6. The teacher, however, rejects his acknowledgement with “no” and signals further continuation of the language play with some laughs at line 7. In response to the teacher’s invitation, Noriko jumps in with the word “fish” so as to mean that “tuna” should be a fish in English. Such a playful exchange demonstrates that learning can be mediated by tools of language affectively and cognitively.

Peer Scaffolding

Regarding the second question, the data indicate that peer learners offer scaffolded assistance to each other affectively, cognitively, and linguistically. Because of space considerations, I will give a brief summary of peer scaffolding in the present paper. Detailed analyses of instances culled from the data will be presented on another occasion.

Affective Scaffolding

In the data, the action of a learner (Ryo) was affectively and cognitively mediated by peer learners and he was guided into participation in the classroom activity. In the beginning of the lesson, the teacher found Japanese written on the blackboard and asked Ryo, who apparently wrote it, to explain it in English. On the blackboard was written “Sono gakusei wa itta. Raishuu kara yoshuu shite kimashu. Uso tsuke, uso tsuke, uso tsuke.” (The student said, “I will prepare for the class from next week on. Liar, liar, liar!”). Ryo had not done the assignment on the previous week and had failed again to do the assignment for this class. He apparently wrote his confession of a forgotten assignment to express his anxiety and shame, as seen in his reply to the teacher’s question “it’s uh: (2.0) it’s my (2.0) it’s my mind. huh huh huh.” After some exchanges between Noriko, who urged Ryo to explain, and Ryo, who was reluctant, Ryo responded, “I: can’t speak English.” To his response, the other students launched into helping him search for words and construct grammatical forms. Meanwhile, Kenji noticed that Hiro was absent and asked the teacher why. The teacher answered that he might not like the class, to which Ryo quickly responded, “He is only lazy.” Positive affect (Arnold & Brown, 1999) created by the peer learners supported Ryo, who failed to do the homework and did not want to speak in English at first. With scaffolded peer assistance he participated in the activity, spoke in English, and even showed concern about the teacher’s feelings with a claim that Hiro was absent not because he did not like the class but because he was lazy.

Meaning-Centered Scaffolding

The learners co-constructed meaning when they discussed alternative interpretations of a tardy worker’s excuse in the text. The teacher presented two alternative interpretations: one was to understand that the woman was honestly reporting the reason she was late for work, that is, she had to take a bus because her car would not start, and the other was to interpret that she had another reason but was making this excuse because she did not want to lose her job. During the course of
examining alternative interpretations, Ryo uttered self-criticism, “I’m a lazy student” and added in L1, “kore amerika no baai dattara boku nanka hoomi ni natto iru deshoo moo. hhh.” (In the United States, I would have already been expelled from school.) The class laughed a little. Then, Noriko hesitantly started “I—” and reported her own experience of making a similar excuse when she could not make it to a job interview. She too uttered self-criticism “I’m (a) liar,” “but only (once),” referring to her experience. By examining the social scene in the task, the learners reflected on their lives, shared their experiences, presented their views, and co-constructed meaning in the target language beyond the boundary between the classroom and the outer world.

**Language-Centered Scaffolding**

The learners also collectively provided language-centered peer scaffolding. Ryo showed difficulty in comprehending a short conversation in the tape because he confused the future tense and conditional aspect. The teacher did not notice his problem and continued explaining the utterances of the speakers on the tape. Noriko first assisted him by giving the meaning in L1, and Kenji joined her in overlap. They soon discovered Ryo was misunderstanding the word “won’t” and explained that “won’t” is a contracted form of “will not.” Ryo’s peers provided adequate assistance; therefore, they did not need the teacher’s intervention.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The present paper has provided an analysis of scaffolding assistance as a mediational tool for L2 learning in a sociocognitive perspective. Although the primary task of the class was listening, the learners in the present study were not passively receiving L2 input but actively engaging with and tacitly incorporating the L2 by providing and being provided with scaffolded assistance.

Self-initiated self-repair produced by the teacher in fragments 1 and 2 shows assistance afforded to the learners. The teacher issued a modified question that simplifies the task in pronunciation teaching and used L1 scaffolding to facilitate grammar instruction.

This study has shown that other-initiated or other-completed repair potentially plays an important role for learners to develop their L2 abilities in the classroom. In fragment 3, Noriko initiated repair to better explain how she solved a listening comprehension problem using a top-down strategy. As she repeatedly signaled the initiation of repair, the teacher latched onto her turn and co-constructively completed it. Here, the intransjective stance/perspective was intersubjectively shared and the learning goal was confirmed between the teacher and learner.

Another type of repair that frequently occurs in the classroom is other-initiated self-repair, particularly repair of the learner’s trouble source initiated by the teacher. Fragment 4 exhibits corrective feedback by the teacher that marks a critical feature in the target grammatical form.

The last type of repair, other-initiated other-repair, is least likely to occur in ordinary conversation because of the infrequent chances for others to initiate and complete repair, and of the greater possibility of threatening the face of the speaker of the trouble source. However, the teacher’s on-the-spot explicit corrective feedback by demonstrating a target form is thought to be effective for learners to notice their pronunciation errors. Finally, fragment 6 displays an interesting occurrence of
language play that involved the learners in learning of pronunciation differences between Japanese and English.

Thus, repair of all four types play an important role as a mediational tool for L2 learning, and repair produced by the teacher affords potential scaffolded assistance to learners in learning focal phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical forms, and developing pragmatic and discursive abilities.

As scaffolded assistance afforded by the teacher plays an important role in facilitating L2 learning in the classroom, peer scaffolding serves as a cognitively and affectively mediational tool for their development. By providing and being provided with scaffolded assistance, learners enable themselves to interact with each other, solve arising problems, and learn the target language.

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REFERENCES


**APPENDIX**

**Transcription Conventions**

- **colon** lengthening of the preceding sound
- **>faster<** passage of talk that is faster than surrounding talk
- **"soft"** speech in soft voice
- **.** falling intonation (final)
- **?** rising intonation (final)
- **,** continuing intonation (non-final)
- cut-off of the current sound
[ ] overlapping talk
(.) short untimed pause
(2.0) timed pause
= latching
italic Japanese in Romaji
// phonetic representation
'idiomatic' idiomatic translation of Japanese utterances

Abbreviations Used in Interlinear Gloss

O object marker
POL politeness marker
Q question marker
PT particle