Emergence of conversation in a semi-structured L2 English interview

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In this pilot study a Japanese intermediate level ESL learner interacted with another Japanese speaker whose English was at near-native level by means of a 30-minute semi-structured interview. The aim was to investigate how shared cultural and language background affect learner discourse. Microanalysis of the data shows that the subject changed from being an interviewee to becoming a conversation partner with her Japanese interlocutor. Specific points at which the interviews changed into a conversation are examined in detail, and it is suggested that sharing a common background and experiences might facilitate the emergence of conversational talk in an interview setting.

1. Background

ESL learners are faced with situations in which they need to talk in their L2 when they could use their L1 with each other, whether as practice sessions in class, or research exercises set up by a researcher or as conversation among themselves in order to improve their L2. What is it that learners do during such sessions, especially when they share the same L1? And how can interactions between learners with same L1 background provide insight and understandings into the nature of their interlanguage and L2 developmental processes? The specific goal of this preliminary investigation is to see how the interlocutors' shared L1 and cultural background can possibly facilitate or impede the learner's interaction.

A great deal of attention has been given to discourse between native speakers (NS) and nonnative speakers (NNS) in various settings, such as classroom interaction, communication tasks, or what researchers loosely term "conversation" (see, e.g. Gaskill 1980; Gass and Varonis, 1984; Brock, Crookes, Day and Long, 1986; Carrol and Swain, 1993). Gass and Varonis (1984), for instance, found that familiarity with the topic of discourse and nonnative speech in general had significant effects on comprehension, while familiarity with a particular nonnative accent facilitates

comprehension of the speech of another nonnative of that language background, and familiarity with a particular nonnative speaker also facilitates comprehension of that person's speech.

While there have been fewer numbers of studies investigating NNS-NNS interactions, as compared to NS-NNS interactions, some research of NNS-NNS contact suggests that NNS interlocutors also greatly influence second language learners' speech (Ervin-Tripp 1964; Gass and Varonis 1985; Takahashi, 1989; Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos and Linnell, 1996; van Lier and Matsuo, 2000). Especially interesting were the results found in Takahashi (1989) and van Lier and Matsuo's (2000) studies. Tahakashi conducted her study to find out how native language background and ESL proficiency contribute to the speaker's speech differences. Six Japanese ESL learners were interviewed by four NNS of English; two of them were native speakers of Japanese while the other two were Spanish L1 speakers, and they varied in their proficiency levels. Her study shows that NNS's utterances became hesitant and short when they spoke with 1) the interlocutor with low proficiency in English and 2) the interlocutor with the same native language background. Most interestingly, when the six Japanese learners of English spoke with a Japanese speaker with low proficiency in English, despite the difficulty they experienced talking to her, they could ask her many questions due to a common knowledge shared by being from the same country (e.g. which cities they were from in Japan, what they miss from there). In other words, their familiarity with the interlocutor's background helped ease their communication difficulty caused by the low proficiency. This result seems to conform to those in Gass and Varonis (1984) in that familiarity with the interlocutor positively affected the communication.

Takahashi (1989) also investigated psychological factors in L2 learner's interaction when she spoke to an interlocutor with the same native background. The fundamental assumption Takahashi had was that Japanese ESL learners would experience discomfort speaking to another Japanese speaker in English. In her follow-up interview with the participants, that was indeed the case. Most participants felt it was unnatural to speak English with the Japanese interlocutors in English. However with the Japanese interlocutor with high proficiency, they lost that nervousness since her English was so good that they did not feel like they were talking to Japanese. In fact they were impressed by her English and wanted to know how she acquired the language so successfully. However, one subject felt uneasy conversing with Japanese interviewers in English regardless of the proficiency levels of the interviewers. She felt she should

not reveal information on private matters to other Japanese people, and Takahashi suspects that this reflects her subject's transferring Japanese sociolinguistic norms of privacy to her interview with Japanese interlocutors in English.

While Takahashi (1989) examined interaction of learners between different proficiency levels, van Lier and Matsuo's (2000) investigation also included interaction between learners of similar proficiency levels. They investigated the speech production of a Japanese learner of English talking to three interlocutors from different proficiency levels-one who had a very high proficiency in English, another who had roughly the same proficiency level as the subject and a third who had a lower proficiency level than she did. They found that symmetry in the conversation was most evident when she spoke with the interlocutor who was roughly at her proficiency level. In the other two cases, in which one person had a higher proficiency level than the other, the more proficient speaker tended to take more initiative in leading the conversation. Thus, it appeared that sharing the same proficiency level promoted symmetry and allowed the interactants to co-construct the conversation in a more or less egalitarian manner.

The next section will briefly review the characteristics of conversation and interview and their relation to the questions raised in this study.

Conversation:

Studies of conversation have been developed since the seminal analysis of the speech exchange system by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974). Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson analyzed the systematics for the turn-taking organization of conversation. Major characteristics of turn-taking mechanisms of conversation include the following. 1) occurrences of more than one person speaking at the same time are common but brief, and can be corrected by repair mechanisms for such turn-taking errors, 2) neither turn size nor order are fixed, but varies, 3) neither length nor content of conversation, nor relative distribution of turns are fixed in advance, 4) turns can be one word long or sentential in length ('turn-constructional unit') and 5) a current speaker may choose a next speaker or next speaker may self-select ('turn-allocation techniques'). Sacks Schegloff and Jefferson suggest the most important features of turn taking in conversation are "a) that it is a local management system and b) that it is an interactionally managed system" (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974, p.40). This view has been adapted and expanded by other researchers (see e.g. van Lier, 1989, 1996; Drew and Heritage, 1992). van Lier (1989, 1996) characterizes

conversation and successfully applies its notion to L2 conversation analysis. Van Lier identifies conversation as follows. First, conversation is locally assembled. That is, the talk can not be planned ahead of time. One can think about a general theme or goal, such as a "request" when she talks to her interlocutor and that type of plannedness can be part of conversation, however, detailed planning of specific questions or topics will make the interaction less conversational. Second, because of the unplannedness of talk in conversation, no one can exactly predict the sequence and outcome of the talk. This unplannedness also is related to what van Lier (1996) calls contingency. Contingency suggests dependency and uncertainty since the content and the direction of conversation is co-constructed by the interactants during the course of the conversation. So if there are two people involved, it must take "two to converse", not one. The last, and possibly most important characteristic of conversation, is the potentially equal distribution of rights and duties in talk. Equal distribution of rights and duties can be described as "symmetry" of conversation. Symmetry refers to a sense of balance in the discourse or the interaction: equal opportunities for taking turns, for changing topics, for asking questions, and so on. I will follow van Lier's definition of "symmetry" of talk, referring to equal distribution of rights and duties throughout the paper.

Interview:

Interviews can be placed along a continuum from completely unstructured interviews (close to conversation) to rigidly structured interviews, while semi-structured interviews can be placed in the middle between these two extremes (Nunan, 1992). While not only the agenda but also details such as exact questions have been predetermined in a structured interview, a semi-structured interview allows some flexibility in the interview in that there will not be a list of predetermined questions by the interviewers. In that sense it might be possible, with the help of both interviewer and interviewee, for the interview to become more conversation-like exchange during the course of interview.

Characteristics of interview have been defined by Silverman (1976), and the following features are pertinent to the present investigation, in contrast with the characteristics of conversation. They are, 1) there is asymmetry in the interaction between interviewer and interviewee; 2) questions are given by interviewer, while the other party plays the role of giving answers to those questions; 3) one party is always responsible for beginning and closing the exchange, including ending

one topic, introducing another. It is obvious then that symmetrical interaction is not expected in interview discourse. This contrast of symmetry and asymmetry of conversation and institutional discourse (which includes interview) respectively has been demonstrated by Drew and Heritage (1992). Drew and Heritage state that in institutional discourse, a direct relationship exists between status/role and discursive rights/obligations respectively. This role-structured institutional or organizational setting does not allow both parties to equally participate in interaction. On the other hand, in ordinary conversation among friends this is not usually the case. In a typical institutional interaction, a question-answer sequence does not leave room for the lay person (the interviewee in the case of an interview) to take the initiative, whereas it enables the professional (the interviewer in interview session) to retain control over the moment-to-moment topic change and thus eventually over the entire interaction. In short, the most obvious distinctions between conversation and interview seem to lie in the symmetry and asymmetry of interaction respectively.

Teacher-centered classroom turn-taking mechanisms seem to be quite similar to interview discourse in that they both share sequential organizations which are unique to institutional talk. Specifically, both teacher and interviewer ask questions, and students and interviewees answer. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), following Bellack et al.'s (1966) notion of classroom interactional patterns, described the basic unit of exchange found in classroom. The basic notion of classroom exchanges is that teaching is manifested through question-answer sequences followed by some kind of evaluation, or confirmation. These three-part exchanges are called Initiation, Response and Feedback (IRF). The Initiation (question or elicitation) is usually done by the teacher and it is followed by a Response (by the student), and then the teacher gives Feedback (follow-up or evaluation) to the student's response (van Lier, 1996). The following excerpt illustrates a typical IRF exchange.

Excerpt 1 (They are discussing a movie they just saw in class...)
Teacher: So Tom, what did the girl do after eating breakfast? - I
Student: She went to school.- R
Teacher: That's right.- F

The IRF can also be a feature of interviews because the interviewer has a certain agenda (or predetermined questions in a structured interview) and he would feel compelled to move on to the next question after acknowledging the response from

the interviewee. The last part in the sequence, 'Feedback,' may be optional if interviewer is not focusing on checking the correctness of the answer that the interviewee provides. In a rigid interview situation, there is no real freedom to break the IRF format or question-answer sequence and to change to natural conversation.

With the differences between institutional discourse (e.g. interview) and ordinary conversation in mind, we can raise questions such as the following: Can semi-structured interview remain as 'interview' throughout the entire session even if the learner and her interlocutor had much in common? How a shared background facilitates or impedes the interactions between a Japanese ESL learner and her bilingual interlocutor.

Answering such questions requires a great deal of observation and detailed description of relevant interactional data. Some of this work has already been done (Young and He, 1998; van Lier and Matsuo, 2000), but much more is needed. In this pilot study I designed some interactional contexts which had the potential of either remaining interview-like or becoming beyond interview and I attempted to describe the circumstances under which one of these things happened.

The data elicitation method is of the "semi-structured interview" variety as described by Nunan (1992). The interlocutor in this study was given general topics and issues to discuss with the ESL learner but not a list of predetermined questions. Therefore the interaction was planned at the macro-level (general topic and outcome) but not at the micro-level (specific questions). In any case, the interactions were not free conversations in terms of planning and expected outcomes (van Lier, 1989). The moderate level of plannedness and predetermined structure would, it was hoped, leave open the possibility for learner initiative and the emergence of true conversational episodes.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants[1]

Naomi is a Japanese female ESL student who was placed in an intermediate level class at an American University. She had lived in the U.S. for approximately 3 months at the time of the study. She had had 8 years of English language education in Japan before coming to the U.S. and her TOEFL score was 530. She was 27 years old at the time of data collection.

Interlocutor

Mako: A Japanese female who had spent her puberty period (6 years) in a country

where English was spoken. She can be considered a bilingual of Japanese and English, though she herself thinks her Japanese is a little more superior to her English. She was in her mid-20s and was a graduate student at an American University at the time of data collection.

2.2 Data Collection

The interview lasted about 30 minutes and was video and audiotaped for data analysis.

2.2.1 Interlocutor Training

Before the actual interview session was conducted, interlocutor-training session took place. This session lasted for about 20 minutes and the interlocutor was given explanations as to how the interview should be carried out. She was advised to ask questions but allow the interviewee to ask questions if she wanted to do so. She was told she could not only ask/answer questions but also freely discuss any issues that might arise. The procedure of interview was explained as follows.

2.2.2 Interview Session

(1) Introduction of yourself. (interlocutor)
Name, status (e.g. student), your background with English and Japanese, etc. This is an important part because the subject will know the interlocutor's language backgrounds, which I believed might have some influence on the learner's interactional styles with her.
(2) Ask questions about the learner.
How long has she been in the States? How does she like it here, etc? This was also important since the subject and the interlocutor had not met before, and it was useful for them to get to know each other a little. After they are getting a little comfortable talking to each other, the interaction will be expanded to the following topic to compare each other's culture (Japanese and British) and share their opinions in order to further achieve bonding with each other.
(3) Cross-cultural communication issue.
Ask the subject about her experience in learning English. Is her learning experience in the U.S. different from the one in Japan? Is American culture a lot different from Japanese culture? What does she think about the U.S., etc.? The interlocutor was encouraged to initiate questions on cross-cultural communication issues; however,

in case the subject asked questions, she was not discouraged from answering any questions that the learner may have.

(4) Direction giving.

Besides asking questions on cross-cultural communication issues, a fixed topic such as direction giving was embedded in the interview. Although the topic itself was fixed, the place that the subject was asked to give direction to was not. The interlocutor was asked to embed the direction-giving question as naturally as possible in order not to break the flow of the interaction.

2.2.3 Follow-up Interview

In order to gauge the possible effects of affective and psychological factors on the learner's speech style in the interview session, she was asked some questions by the researcher after the interview. Questions included, 'did you feel comfortable talking to the interviewer? 'if so, why?'

2.3 Analysis

As discussed earlier, the data are of the semi-structured interview type, where some flexibility is allowed but the general topic is controlled and a certain outcome is expected. Furthermore, since the interlocutor was the only one who received instructions for the interview (e.g. what the general topics were), an obvious asymmetry was established from the beginning in terms of distribution of rights and duties in the interaction. In order to carefully examine interactional styles change over the course of an interview, especially focusing the analysis on the symmetry/asymmetry of the interactions in this report, I chose to examine the following features.

1. Topic change initiations
2. Question initiations
3. Question/Answer sequences

3. Results and Discussion

I will show typical examples of NNS-NNS semi-interview session in terms of these three interactional features above, with an emphasis placed on the ESL learner's utterances.

Topic Change Initiations

Naomi took the initiative of changing/initiating topics quite frequently; the topic change was initiated by her seven times throughout the interview session. The typical way in which Naomi attempted to change topic was as follows. She used some hesitation marker to allow herself to take the turn to initiate a new topic. She uttered "um..." quite frequently after Mako's turns in an attempt to take the turn or sometimes after her own utterances in order to keep the turn. The following excerpt shows the latter case.

Excerpt 2: Topic Change Initiation

81 N: Did you try to speak frequently English?
82 M: In Japan? when I lived back in Japan?
83 N: (nodding)
84 M: Well, actually, like you said we don't have a chance to use it in class
86 N: Uh-huh **Um..by the way where are you from?**
87 M: I'm from Tokyo.

As is shown in line 86, Naomi tried to keep the turn by uttering "um..." along with the phrase, "by the way" to indicate the topic change. After Naomi's initiating to keep the floor in line 86 and change the topic, the rights and duties seem to become symmetrical between Naomi and Mako. Before this exchange, Naomi showed Mako her adulation on Mako's fluency in English and started asking a question about her English language experience. Naomi posed a series of questions regarding how Mako acquired such high fluency in English and the exchange became more two-way, instead of one-way (Mako to Naomi) interview type. This is similar to what Takahashi (1989) found in most of her Japanese subjects' data when they spoke to a Japanese interlocutor with very high fluency in English. Instead of keeping feeling awkward to speak in English with a Japanese person, they showed interest in learning how to achieve high fluency in English like her. In my data, interestingly enough, after taking the initiative asking questions on the topic of Mako's English language acquisition, Naomi retained her more or less equal status in her interaction with Mako.

The following section will show how questions (not necessarily a topic change) are initiated by Naomi.

Question Initiations

Naomi asked many questions during the semi-structured interview. She initiated 22 questions to Mako, while she was asked 52 questions by Mako. Distributions of Naomi's questions to Mako are summarized in Tables 1 below.

Table 1: Distribution of Naomi's questions to Mako

Mako's English	Mako's studies/major in Japan	Mako's current graduate program	General Questions about Mako	Cross-cultural issues	Total
1	2	3	11	5	22

In their interactions, they asked each other many questions about their common experiences in studying abroad and expanded the topic to further discussing cross-cultural issues. Mako discussed her own problems adjusting to the American class participation system and they both ended up constructing quite symmetrical interactions. They seemed to have felt a sense of solidarity in that they are both Japanese, sharing similar characteristics, that is, they are both not used to aggressively participate in class discussions in this case. Following is a typical example of how Naomi initiated questions.

Excerpt 3: Initiating questions

162 M: Oh you walk to your house?

163 N: Yes. **Where do YOU live?**

164 M: I live behind the hospital. I live in Foxhall Village which is down...Do you know Reservoir?

165 N: Yes.

166 M: I go down Reservoir to the opposite way of Wisconsin.

167 N: **So you live in an apartment?**

168 M: I live in a house. Well a house, a group house and I have five roommates.

169 N: Oh (laughter).

Until line 162 Mako was asking about Naomi's apartment, such as how to get to her place. As shown in line 163, Naomi decided to ask about Mako's living arrangements by asking, "Where do YOU live" stressing "you". This strategy indicates that now it is her turn to ask questions about Mako, demonstrating her desire to be a

co-participant in conversation. After getting some information about the location of Mako's place, she further asked her if the place was an apartment in line 167. This illustrates that it was not only Mako who was getting information from her interlocutor but that Naomi was equally engaging in "conversation" by distributing equal rights and duties with Mako.

In sum so far, through a close examination of the data, it was found that Naomi seemed to make active decisions and began to share control of the talk in a more symmetrical manner with Mako especially when she felt she found a mutual "topic" of talk. In fact, she decisively initiated a topic which can be shared by two of them and expanded to more like a discussion when they talked about cross-cultural communication issues.

I would like to now turn to the question how an interview was shifted into a more conversation-like interaction or in what circumstances it remained an interview.

Question/Answer Sequences

As discussed earlier in the paper, IRF (initiative, response, and feedback) seems to be a typical pattern in classroom teacher/student exchange, but can also be seen in interview type turn-taking mechanism. This expresses an unequal relationship, since the teacher (or the interviewer) initiates, the learner (or the interviewee) responds and then again the teacher (interviewer) gives feedback with evaluative or confirmation nature.

As can be predicted from the frequent occurrences of topic change initiations and question initiations by Naomi in her interaction with Mako, their interaction shifted from interview style to a more conversation-like style at times. This shift from interview to conversation seems to be caused by mutual experience or shared cultural background, and the shift happened with Naomi's breaking the question/answer sequence by throwing in comments or expanding the topic by asking further questions to the interlocutor. Let us now examine how IRF type discourse was organized and then either remained as is or changed into more conversation-like exchange in the following excerpts.

The following excerpt is a typical 'question-to-conversation sequence' found in Naomi-Mako exchanges.

Excerpt 4: IRF exchange segments

171　M: Yeah, do you have any roommates?--I
172　N: No.--R
173　M: You live alone? Aww..--F
174　N: **H..How did you find that? --I**
175　M: I had a friend who was living there and she moved out and she asked me if I was interested and I go over to her house. It was a lovely house, gorgeous house, so...--R
176　N: **Um..Do your housemates nice? Oh no, are they nice? --I**
177　M: Yes, very nice. I have two Spanish roommates and three American roommates. --R
178　N: **Good good! ha ha --(F)**
179　M: Yea, we kind of help each other with cooking and stuff.
180　N: Oh. Good. What did you do you cook?
181　M: All kind of things! (laugh)
182　N: (laugh)

Naomi took an initiative in line 174 to get some information about how Mako got her roommates/house. Furthermore, she followed up with more questions inquiring about the roommate, which showed she was interested in learning more about Mako. Lastly, she gave a positive remark, “good good!” with friendly laughter, to express her rapport with Mako. This evaluative-like remark “good good” first seemed to be a typical evaluative marker codable as Feedback in IRF sequence, but was softened with laughter and it seems as though what she meant was “how nice” as an adulational response to Mako’s ideal living situation. In fact, “good” could be a direct translation from Japanese word “*ii*” which would perfectly fit in this context, meaning, “nice”. During this exchange, the semi-structured question-answer type sequence from the direction of Mako to Naomi ended and that the role seemed to be reversed. After this exchange, as can be seen in line 179-182, they started chatting about cooking. Later as an expansion of their interaction, they found out they hare more things in common, and shared topic facilitated their interaction to become more conversation like.

4. Conclusion

In this report, I showed that the ESL student produced interesting interactional work

in her talk with Mako (a Japanese interlocutor who was a near-native speaker of English with no foreign accent). More globally speaking, the ELS learner made a leap from an interviewee to a conversation partner with her interlocutor. Solidarity building and rapport have been attempted in their discourse. Furthermore, because of more symmetrical exchange patterns in their interactions, their talk was not so rigidly "planned" anymore during the course of their interaction. Although Mako and Naomi still adhered to the superset of the topic (for instance, they discussed cross-cultural communication topic as planned), their interaction had local assembly, with Naomi commenting about Mako's cross-cultural experiences. Lastly, another characteristic described by van Lier (1996), *contingency*, was also realized in their interaction, since Naomi co-constructed "conversation" with her interlocutor, and thus their interaction was more contingent and dependent on both interactants.

After the interview, I met with Naomi and discussed the interview with her. It was found that Naomi felt bonded with Mako in that they shared similar experiences-especially living abroad. She also indicated that she felt comfortable talking with Mako since she was comfortable asking Mako any questions. It seems as though it could have been due to the fact that she figured out she was roughly the same age as Mako and was in a position to ask her questions. The way in which Japanese interact with others is influenced by social status and age, due to the fact that rank-consciousness is practiced in Japanese culture. Thus, as soon as she found out that they are in the same age group, Naomi felt at ease initiating questions. Similar results were found in Takahashi's (1989) study; she found that one Japanese subject practiced Japanese privacy norm to her interaction with only Japanese interlocutors, but not with others. Thus, if Naomi conversed with non-Japanese interlocutors, she might not practice Japanese sociolinguistic norms.

We looked at just a very small part of the dynamics of interaction. I have observed semi-interview session between two Japanese speakers in L2 English- one intermediate level ESL learner, the other near native speaker of English, especially how topic change and question initiation were conducted by the ESL learner and how they are related to familiarity of topics and background. It is evident that we should investigate how her interaction would differ if she interacts with NS of English, with shared and unshared backgrounds with her, and compare the results with the current study. We should also expand the scope by looking more closely at a comparison between NNS who are from a familiar background, versus NNS who are from a non-familiar background. We must be careful not to make unwarranted inferences.

Sometimes, of course, we just happen to get along better in conversation with one person than with another, for a host of possible reasons. We just ‘click’ or ‘on the same wavelength’ or whatever we choose to call it. However, I suggest that symmetry of interaction, as well as the background of the interactants are factors that merit further exploration in classroom teaching and action research, since they are likely to present different learning opportunities to learners.

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(Endnotes)

[1] Both participants' names are pseudonyms