

# **An ethnographic examination of interaction affordances in multicultural contexts**

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## **1. Introduction**

The contemporary literature regarding discourse and mediation in multilingual and multicultural environments has placed an outsized focus on the spoken word. This provides the impression that observation of verbal utterances is the primary, if not exclusive, means for understanding communication between interactants. Particularly within language learning contexts, recent empirical research has devoted much time and effort on discussions of, among other topics, questioning strategies (e.g., Wangru, 2016), revoicing or recasting (e.g., Inan, 2014), and spoken humor (e.g., Le & Renandya, 2017), all of which center speech as the main form of mediated discourse.

Naturally, this has generated implications for research and practice in language education and applied linguistics, both areas in which research concerns itself over the importance of speech at the expense of other interactional resources that transcend that which the vocal tract can produce (Worgan & Moore, 2010). Within educational contexts, dialogic mediated interactions (Hall, 1993) and related, Vygotskian approaches to teaching and learning continue to place a narrow lens on the spoken word. This approach risks decentering the importance of gestures, facial expressions, and other resources that fall under the scope of the New London Group's conceptualization of multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

A nominal portion of the sociolinguistics field has devoted some research focus on pragmatics as a source of co-construction of meaning (Arnold, 2012; Smotrova & Lantolf, 2013), indicating the possibility that the nonverbal interactional resources can play a complementary rather than supplementary role in dialogic interaction. Exploring the full range of interactional resources in this fashion can hold significant implications for both linguistics and language education. As a result, the

study presented in this paper seeks to expand that discussion through data that demonstrates the nature of various interactional resources employed to overcome shortcomings of verbal utterances in dialogic interaction.

## **2. Research context and design**

I conducted an ethnographic study (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010) of a Japanese university EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom during the spring semester of the 2019-20 Japanese academic year. Over the course of two months at a public university in Japan, I was a participant observer in first-year, required English classes to collect interactional data between an L1 English-speaking teacher and his L1 Japanese-speaking students. I collected field notes documenting my observations and audio recordings of classes for transcription and discourse analysis, as well as conducted stimulated recall interviews of the teacher and various students to gather their perspectives on my observations.

I analyzed the body of collected data through lenses of dialogic interaction (Engin, 2017; Goldenberg, 1992), teacher-student rapport (Webb & Barrett, 2014), learner agency (Mercer, 2011), and social power (French & Raven, 1959). Relevant to this study, I sought out instances of classroom interaction where differing perspectives led to potential breakdowns in communication (Jacquemet, 2011), which prompted either the teacher or his students to employ nonverbal means of communication to mediate interaction or build dialogue.

## **3. Findings and implications**

I analyzed 51 discrete occurrences of classroom interaction in which the teacher expanded the use of interactional resources while in dialogue with students. Of those instances, the teacher shifted from one interactional resource to another in order to address a breakdown in communication or build dialogue based on a perceived opportunity at least 16 times. This means that, when employing one interactional resource (e.g., likely a verbal utterance), the teacher perceives that his students do not understand what he is trying to communicate. In such cases, he chose to communicate through other

interactional resources (e.g., gestures, facial expressions, written text on the blackboard) to facilitate a greater sense of mutual understanding.

In 18 other instances, the teacher recast or extended meaning through the same interactional resource in order to negotiate said challenges or opportunities. This meant that the teacher employed one interactional resource in different ways to facilitate mutual understanding. For example, with respect to verbal instructions, the teacher may decide to repeat his instructions more slowly or by giving examples, demonstrating the importance of dynamically adjusting discursive practices in case of challenges in developing alignment between interactants.

Both sets of circumstances, further detailed by interview excerpts from both teacher and students, appear to indicate that the ability to employ a wide range of interactional resources affords a greater likelihood of co-constructing meaning among interactants while mitigating challenges that might impede mutual understanding. The students in class acknowledge the teacher's expansive usage of interactional resources and are, in turn, encouraged to express meaning in a similar, expansive fashion. What results is a classroom environment that allows for a greater degree of alignment between teacher and student even when they differ in knowledge and sociocultural identities.

This research proposes important implications for research regarding interaction across differences of language and culture. Particularly in multilingual and multicultural contexts, where interactants must come to a consensus on negotiated norms and customs (Lonsmann, 2017), the establishment of alignment, mutual understanding, and rapport may take place, at least in part, outside formulaic patterns of the spoken word. While evidence of extensions of interactional resources reify the importance of the conventions of conversational analysis in terms of intonation, speaking speed, and word stress, the multimodality of interactional resources requires a consideration of other affordances and resources that discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2002) may not be able to fully capture. Moreover, acknowledgment of interaction affordances also necessitates within analysis of interaction a more comprehensive accounting of the environment in which interaction takes place.

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