

# A Study of Student Initiative in Group Formation and Interaction

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# **A Study of Student Initiative in Group Formation and Interaction**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores how student perceptions of interpersonal relationships affect interaction and the subsequent language learning that occurs within the classroom. In this progress report of a fifteen-week study of two Japanese university-level English classes, the evolution of the social environment of the classroom is documented from a variety of perspectives. Research techniques include questionnaires, classroom observations, visual representations of the social environment and interaction analysis. Sociocultural theory, ecological metaphors, and concepts such as Bourdieu's *habitus* inform the study, while elements of ethnographic methodology and classroom research are incorporated. Initial findings are presented and implications for language teaching pedagogy are also discussed.

## **Theoretical Background**

The researchers share the view that, 'it is surely whatever actually happens in the classroom that really matters', (Allwright and Bailey, 1991, p.xvii). Learning does not happen in a vacuum, and if we seek to investigate how language acquisition occurs in the classroom context an understanding of what that context is must first be achieved. This research takes a constructivist approach to language learning. It is considered that 'learning is fundamentally experiential and fundamentally social'

(Wenger, 1998, p.227) and it is through our interactions with others that we construct meaning and our identity is formed. Goffman (1959) argued that our identity is to some degree socially attributed to us and, in *social comparison theory* as outlined by Festinger (1954), our self-concept is partly determined as a result of the comparisons we make between ourselves and others. Because of this, it is felt that the interpersonal relationships that exist within the classroom have an important role to play in the learning process. A Vygotskian perspective holds that our higher mental functions are derived from social relationships, and that 'In order to understand the individual, one must first understand the social relations in which the individual exists' (Wertsch, 1985, p.58). If we want to understand the actions of learners, we must investigate the social scene of the classroom in which they find themselves.

The constructivist approach adopted here places a strong emphasis on the *context* of language learning (the social scene of the classroom) and the tension between individual choice and collective behaviour in defining that scene. Bourdieu used his concept of the *habitus* to describe how individuals develop subjective behavioural tendencies in response to the objective social structures they meet (Bourdieu, 1977), and Cicourel (1973) argued that people make choices for action based on the 'physical features of the ecological scene' (Cicourel, 1973, p.55) that they are in. The social scene provides us with instructions that we interpret and use to make plans for action, actions which help in turn to define us as individuals in the eyes of others. In the ecological metaphor as proposed by van Lier (2004) the role of context in language use is considered so important that 'if you take the context away there is no language left to be studied' (van Lier, 2004, p.20). On this argument, we might argue that without the social scene language is nothing. As well as being socially constituted, language is also socially constitutive, and Lantolf states that one of the key motivations for using language is to 'mediate and regulate our relationships

with others and with ourselves and thus change the nature of those relationships' (2000, p.1). Language is both a manifestation of the social environment and a tool of its creation, and 'lives only in the dialogic interaction of those who make use of it' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 183).

## **Research Questions**

These research questions formed a principal line of enquiry, but did not completely define, nor limit the research agenda.

1. How do perceptions of interpersonal relationships develop?
2. How do students' relationships affect interaction?
3. What are the implications for language teaching pedagogy?

## **Setting and Participants**

The two classes involved in the study are part of the Freshman English programme, which is based on a set of principles and aims including:

- learning through interaction
- the centrality of autonomy, independence, and choice in the learning process
- the development of interpersonal communicative competence
- assisting students' transition to a more learner-centred environment

Most students come directly from high school, typically a teacher-centred environment with a predominant focus on language analysis and instruction often occurring in Japanese, whereas in the Freshman English classroom, students are encouraged to use only the target language. This research is being conducted over the course of one fifteen-week university semester, two-thirds of which have been

completed at the time of writing. This first semester of Freshman English begins with an orientation unit, which is followed by two theme-based modules. In the Orientation Unit, there is an introduction to the student-centred nature of the programme and an emphasis on developing the social aspect of the class through 'getting to know you' style activities such as interviews. There are four 1.5-hour lessons per week, although it is relevant to note that the groups, containing 27 and 28 students in classes A and B respectively, are together for an additional 3 hours a week outside of the Freshman English programme. Therefore, the students spend a total of 9 hours in each other's company each week. With such a large amount of time studying and learning together, the social environment must play a significant role in how the classes function on an academic level.

## **Method**

The researchers responsible for this study are the language instructors of the two classes involved. This combined role of researcher and teacher offers an insight into 'what is going on' (Goffman, 1959) in the classroom and, adopting an ethnographic approach, a description of social structures from inside the group (van Lier, 1988) is being produced. Breen (1986) criticized the experimental laboratory analogy for the classroom as ignoring the social reality of learners, and the researchers agree that in order to study student interaction in a meaningful way a classroom-based approach is essential. As respecting the integrity of the classroom was of high priority, the research tools were designed to be as unobtrusive as possible, often taking the form of classroom activities.

The classroom is here viewed as a social construct; the coming together, at a set place and time of a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) that acquires its own characteristics and ways of behaving. Due to the primary concern with the

classroom, a humanistic approach has been adopted; rather than attempting to generalise findings, the data have been analysed as they are within the unique social context in which they were generated. Using a research approach advocated by van Lier (1988), the researchers 'want to understand' what is happening between people when they come together to form a 'class'. In exploring the relationship between the classroom context and second language learning, this study is not an attempt to prove or disprove hypotheses but rather to 'develop emerging theories' (Allwright and Bailey, 1991, p.37) that may be of assistance to others in the field working within their own contexts.

Both objectivity and subjectivity have a role to play in this research. Due to the awareness that the researchers' perspectives are influenced by their position as both as group members and researchers, and that 'the content of knowledge is never entirely independent from the subject' (Maquet, 1964, p.53), the researchers' and participants' subjective positions have been acknowledged throughout. Resulting from this recognition of subjectivity and the belief that 'all techniques and methodologies must be continuously in question' (Holliday, 1994, p.31), the research tools have been adopted and implemented in a flexible manner. There are five research approaches used in this study: questionnaires, observations, visual representations of the social environment, interaction analysis, and interviews.

## **Questionnaires**

A questionnaire, written in English and Japanese, was conducted in the second week, and will be repeated again in the final week of the semester. This questionnaire consists of a single question: *In your class, approximately how many people do you think are close friends, friends, acquaintances, and strangers?* Comparing the results for both classes, the average percentages are relatively similar. Students considered

the largest number of their classmates to be *friends*, with the average being 47% for class A and 55% for class B, This was followed by *acquaintances*, at 35% and 43% respectively. It was the figures for the *close friends* and strangers categories that researchers found most revealing. After only two weeks of class, the students in class A believed on average that 27% of their classmates were *close friends*, while class B responded with an even higher figure of 34%. Looking at the opposite end of the spectrum, class A grouped 11% of the other students as *strangers*, whereas class B resulted in the slightly lower average of 8%. The researchers were struck by the high percentage of this final category in particular, especially after taking into account the fact that for the large portion of class time until that point, students were involved in activities designed to increase the social dynamic of the learning environment. Despite this, there was still a seemingly significant number of students who felt that they did not know certain members of their class whatsoever.

## Observations

At the beginning of each class, a seating map is drawn showing where each student has elected to sit, a simple approach that has revealed much about how students relationships are manifested physically. Interaction patterns and potentially critical moments are also noted throughout the lesson. In order to gain fresh perspectives, the researchers have also observed each other's classes twice, and will conduct another peer-observation later in the semester, which will be recorded on video. Through these focused observations, it has been possible to track developments in the social environment within the physical space of the classroom. The data gathered from these observations will be referred to later in the chapter.

## **Visual Representations of the Social Environment**

In order to access students' perceptions of the social structure of the class, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of lessons they were given a circle with the members of the class listed around the circumference - like a clock face, but with names replacing the hours of the day. Students were asked to circle their own name, and then draw 5 lines between classmates who they felt had some kind of connection to each other. All the individually completed 'relationship circles' were then collected and collated to create a class circle representing all the students' perceptions (see Figure 1). For class A, the highest total number of links drawn between two students was 11 (i.e. they were connected by 40% of the other students), whereas in class B, the highest was 15 (53%), with both cases involving females. Most of the links were between students of the same sex, although there were a few cases of single connections between boys and girls, and one case, in class A, of a male and female being linked 6 times (22%). Interestingly, there were four students who did not connect themselves with anyone else: three students in class A, and one in class B. Also of note is the fact that one of these students, who will be discussed in more detail later, only drew a single line on his relationship circle and, even when prompted by the teacher, did not add any more. The information garnered by the relationship circles provided immediate insight into how the students in the class saw themselves and others to be socially positioned, knowledge which we as external observers could not have otherwise accessed.

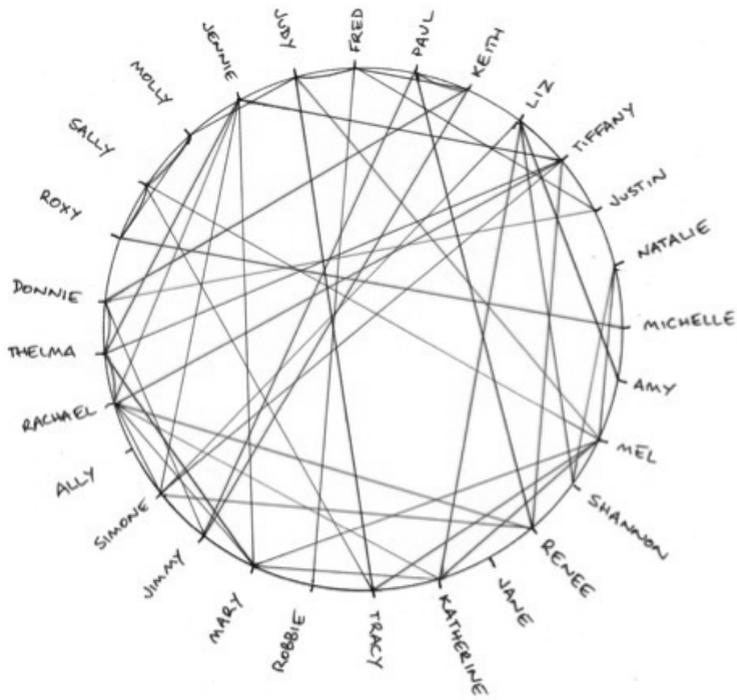


Fig. 1: Class A Relationship Circle

To create visual representations, or sociometric diagrams (see Figure 2), of the social environments of the two classes, the researchers combined the data from the seating maps with the relationship circles. Typical seating maps for each class were drawn indicating where each student tended to sit, with the interpersonal links generated from the relationship circles subsequently being added to the maps. The diagrams illustrate how the relationships between individuals as perceived by the class as a whole map onto the physical arrangement of the group in the classroom setting.

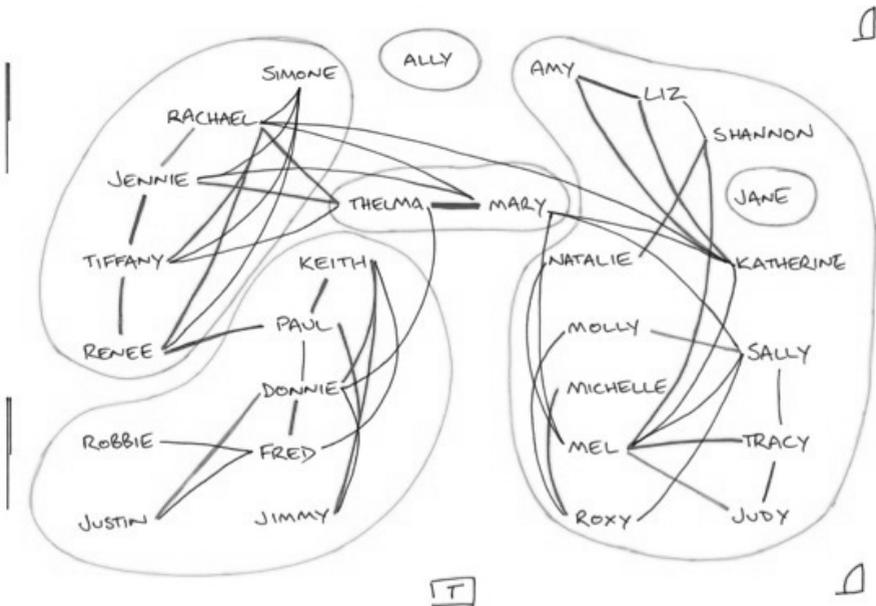


Fig. 2: Class A Sociometric Diagram

Based on the observations and sociometric diagrams to date, it is possible to make several points. In both classes, there are 5 main subgroups that can be identified within the group of students as a whole, each falling largely on gender lines. These formed early, within the first week of semester, with most containing at least one member who has social connections outside of their principal subgroup. To take the case of class A, the subgroups are a large group of a dozen females, a small group of 5 girls, the group of 7 males, a pair of girls, and those ‘outsiders’ who have no clear connection with anyone else in the class. There are two girls who clearly fall into this category, and one boy who is also part of the ‘boys group’, but seems to be so based

more on his gender than any other reason. Additionally, the seating arrangements of the classrooms appear to have some effect on the ways in which groups form and interact. In class B, for example, two outsider students who sit on their own in a classroom in which the desks are arranged in a 'horseshoe' shape seem to attach themselves to a particular group in a classroom in which the desks are arranged in 'blocks', indicating that this seating arrangement facilitates their incorporation into the group.

## **Interaction Analysis**

In the coming weeks the researchers plan to make digital recordings of classroom-based interaction that can be used as the basis of detailed analysis. Informal records to date suggest that further inquiry will lead to valuable insights into how student relationships and student groupings affect the nature of that interaction. That said, some potentially significant instances of dialogue have been noted that warrant consideration. What follows is just one example, from class A, of what has been observed to this point.

Paul, Renee, Tracy and Robbie are working together on creating a list of possible presentation topics. Paul - one of the most confident and active members of the class - and Renee - a member of the close-knit group of 5 females - are the boy-girl pair who received a high number of connections in the class relationship circle. Tracy is softly spoken and has a close friendship with another girl, who is even quieter than her. The two have sat next to each other at the beginning of every lesson since the first week of the semester. Robbie is the potential outsider who associates with the other males but is often non-participatory in group work, even with the boys, and passive during mingling activities, rarely approaching other students to instigate conversation. He is also the student mentioned above who only drew a single link on

his relationship circle. Significantly, Robbie has come from an all-male high school and, in his presentation, openly referred to his difficulty communicating with girls, and adjusting to an environment containing such a high ratio of females to males. Although they are both quiet and tentative in class, Tracy and Robbie have a higher language proficiency than both Paul and Renee.

Renee: and?

Paul: entertainment (.) last?

Renee: (.) sports

Paul: finish!

Throughout the conversation, which consisted largely of single-word exchanges between Renee and Paul, Tracy and Robbie did not contribute verbally at all. Although Tracy paid attention, and gave signals of agreement to what was being said, she did not appear to attempt to participate in the dialogue, and even if she did, was unable to include herself in any concrete way. Meanwhile, Robbie barely made eye-contact and preferred to silently take notes the entire time. Perhaps Paul and Renee effectively excluded the others from the conversation due to the strength of their personal connection, or maybe the reason for the lack of group dialogue was a result of the characteristics of the quieter students. In any case, the opportunities for all the students to engage in meaningful interaction seem to be limited.

## **Future Directions**

Data collected so far have already illuminated a great deal about the development of student relationships and the interaction occurring in the two classes involved. Although the pieces of evidence may appear fragmentary in isolation, when

considered alongside each other and in context, they reveal new perspectives on how individual students come together to form a class. From a pedagogical standpoint, there are new positions to be considered as language instructors learn more about how student relationships affect interaction and subsequent language learning. For example, the question of how much choice students should be given in the classroom in terms of who they work and sit with. This may be especially true in cases where learner autonomy is valued and encouraged.

Having investigated the formation of social groups and relationships between students in the classes involved, it is now necessary to take a closer look at how students act and interact with each other in the classroom. Towards the end of the first semester, the two classes will be filmed completing a 60-minute, classroom-based task. This task will involve high levels of inter- and intra-group interaction and student initiation, and minimal input from the teachers, with classes A and B being mixed randomly. The video recordings will be analysed, taking into account the different roles and patterns of behaviour that students display. The impact of this on the success of the task will also be examined. Finally, because of the importance of learners' perceptions of themselves and the uniqueness of each individual learner, on the last day of the semester students will be asked to take part in interviews in order to explore in more depth their individual identities as language learners. These interviews, recorded on mp3 players, will focus on the individual students' language learning past, present and future and, to maintain the integrity of the classroom context, will be performed by students in pairs. It is hoped that any data collected will shed some light on the roles that students have assumed and the interpersonal relationships and patterns of behaviour that they have adopted.

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