Online Interactions of Hungarian and Japanese EFL learners:
A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The aim of present study is to address how Japanese and Hungarian EFL learners co-constructed their social relations, identity and power through the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) online. Following the principles of critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1999), I analyzed ELF online interactions between six Hungarian teenagers with low socio-economic background and five Japanese university students. The five-week-long classroom research was launched in a disadvantaged school setting where Hungarian learners were given tablets.

Data was collected in three steps: three audio questionnaires were answered by the Hungarian participants at three-week intervals: before the launch of the project, in the middle and at the end. Audio questionnaires consisted of 27 statements on a four-point Likert-scale and further explanations were elicited in the recordings. Second, during the project, five English classes were recorded and transcribed. Finally, learners' posts and interactions on the website served as the third source of data set.

The Discourse of ELF was co-constructed in participants' interactions as they negotiated meaning and their identities. Situated meanings revealed a shift where ELF and the website acted as a liberating power, thus Hungarians could express themselves in L2 more freely. Japanese applied interactional strategies - estimating age appropriate language, negotiation of linguistic repertoire, paraphrasing, repetition - to achieve mutual understanding. Learners managed to accommodate to each other while their distinct identities surfaced. Findings suggest that ELF online should be encouraged in classroom practices as it extends geographical and socio-cultural boundaries and prepares students' for global communication.

Keywords: ELF, e-learning, identity

Introduction

Globalization and rapid technological development made it easier to access English and it also changed the way people communicate. Moreover, digital devices are getting more and more popular among students in foreign language learning. The present study focuses on discourses emerging from the interactions of Hungarian teenagers and Japanese university students online, using tablets, within a socio educational setting. Following the principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA), it will be addressed how Hungarian and Japanese EFL learners constructed social relations, identity and power through the use of ELF online.

English as a lingua franca

The lingua franca of the twenty-first century is English, the medium of international communication for speakers who do not share the same first language (Phillipson, 2008, p. 250). Supporters of this position claim that one single language is essential to connect people due to current growth in mobility and globalization. On the other hand, language purists only recognize globalization and the expansion of English as a threat against their own language. A nation's values are partly symbolized by their national language; therefore, English may lead to marginalization of other languages and identity loss (Phillipson, 2008, p. 251). For that reason, local English varieties need to be considered and adjustments have to be made in order to maintain balance in intercultural communication, as suggested by Phillipson (2008, p. 265).

One needs to know manners, to be polite, thoughtful, both culturally, and linguistically sensitive, when using English in an international conversation, regardless of the variety spoken (McArthur, 2001, p. 11). This approach treats ELF or "International English" as a way of "international communication across national and linguistic boundaries", mostly, but not restricted to, the countries belonging to Kachru's (1992, 2005) expanding circle (Jenkins, 2006, p. 160). In this paper, similarly to Jenkins (2009), I would like to refer to English as lingua franca in this functional sense, not as a linguistic variety (p. 200).

When English is used as lingua franca, between non-native speakers of English, usage and norms become less relevant (Jenkins, 2006, p. 161). ELF promotes successful intercultural communication and it is a useful tool to negotiate meaning with each other in order to achieve a common understanding by using a shared common

linguistic ground. Seargeant (2009) calls this approach the "repertoire paradigm of language use" in which speakers possess a wide variety of registers or situation-specific strategies to activate and apply in the appropriate context (p. 12).

According to Seidlhofer (2009, p. 196), in a successful ELF conversation participants need to balance cooperative and territorial imperatives. Speakers' language use takes on a cooperative function, which means that one accommodates to other social actors in the conversation by using habitually pre-determined expressions, words, which are known to all of them, so that they can achieve mutual understanding. Their language use also acts as a territorial marker of social identity and signals group membership. Calling attention to differences points to one's distinct identity while similarities signal group membership with the other community of speakers (p. 197).

The majority of previous studies explored online communication projects between native and non-native speakers of English, despite the fact that nowadays most English interactions occur between non-native speakers (Graddol, 2006, p. 87). Therefore, my project investigates communication between Hungarian and Japanese students, using English as lingua franca.

Identity construction

Important elements of intercultural interactions are to confront students with the fact that the success of communication is strongly dependent on how they are perceived by others, referring to Oetzel's (2009) concept of ascribed identity, whether this is the one they wish to convey, meaning their avowed identity, and how they view their international communication partners (p. 62).

My study is embedded in a socio cultural framework (Vygotsky, 1978), with special focus on classroom interactions, collaborative learning and constructing knowledge through social interactions (p. 33). Further, I wish to take a dynamic, situation specific perspective, relying on poststructuralist notions of identity. Following this approach, Norton (2000) highlights identity as "dynamic and changing over historical time and social space" (p. 125) in her qualitative study, hence it is context dependent. This notion of identity includes the social dimension, in other words, identity is "co-constructed" through social interactions (pp. 12-13). Further, she connects her idea of investment with Bourdieu's (1977) concept of cultural capital; she suggests

that if learners invest in their L2 learning, they know they will "increase the value of their cultural capital" (2000, p. 10). Also, investment in L2 entails investment in an L2 learner's identity because learners are constantly organizing and reorganizing "their sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world" (Norton, 2000, p. 139). Baker (2006) also states that a person's identity is not steady rather it is formed by social context and language through negotiating meaning and understanding. It is always re-constructed and shifts as situations change (p. 407).

Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001, p.12) claim that in the poststructuralist theory, language belongs to the ways in which people interact and influence others, therefore, power relations are relevant to consider in connection with identity negotiation. In line with this, Norton (2000, p. 7) refers to Foucault (1980) claiming that power relations operate on both macro and micro levels, on the level of daily interactions as well. Later on, Norton (2011) extends this approach by adding that subjectivity, in other words identity theories, has to be perceived within the web of relations and one's position is constructed within a variety of discourses (p. 2).

Further, in an online project, public and private identities are also important to consider (Coleman, 2013, p. 24) because of the technological advancement, which surrounds the students and may determine their identity construction. Weintraub (1997) suggested that private facet is "hidden or withdrawn" while public refers to "open, revealed or accessible" (pp. 4-5). Nissenbaum's (2004) idea of "privacy as contextual integrity" conveys the privacy of information about people, engaged with contexts or "life spheres" (p. 120). She further explains that contextual integrity is sustained when two types of norms: "norms of appropriateness" and "norms of flow" are equally supported (p. 120). Within an interaction, people understand what kind of information is adequate to inquire in a particular situation (norm of appropriateness) and also they expect others to know whether the gathered information should be shared with others (norm of flow) (p. 120). Let us take the context of human relationships as an example, in which a person shares confidential information with his or her ally, then in the "sphere of friendship" that person will expect that the friend will not give away the private message (pp. 131-132).

Nissenbaum (2004) adds that contextual integrity, being context-dependent by nature, differs across culture, moment and situation (p. 138). Thus, private identity is the one a person shares only in a certain situation with a limited number of people, while public identity is more open and accessible to a wider group of people.

Critical discourse analysis

Carmel (2009) defined critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a theory of language and discourse in social systems. Its aim is to examine "how social relations, power and identity are constructed within a larger social context", while applying critical theory (p. 406). Other researchers added that CDA can be considered not only as a theory but also a method. (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui & O' Garro Joseph, 2005, p. 370). Based on the theoretical position, one is able to grasp truth or reality through its formation and discursive construction by different social powers. In this sense discourses express interpretations of everyday life. On the other hand, CDA as a method serves as an instrument with which one may interpret and comprehend a social phenomenon as linguistic and social theories come into dialogue (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui & O' Garro Joseph, 2005, pp. 370-371).

Rogers and her colleagues (2005) claim that critical discourse analysts, in addition to the interpretation of the function of language, provide answers to how it actually functions in a particular social context (p. 369). Moreover, they look at how participants of the interaction give their language use specific meanings in particular circumstances (Gee, 1999, p. 40). These are flexibly changeable patterns that construct knowledge as meaningful in certain ways and are referred to as situated meanings (p. 49). Situated meanings of language are often negotiated between social actors and as the interactions develop they revise their situated meanings (p. 52). Gee (1999, p. 17) distinguished discourse with capital D and discourse with lowercase d. Discourse with lowercase d refers to linguistic elements and how these are used in the action of interacting. Discourse with capital D refers to non-linguistic issues such as identity, which is co-constructed through discourse and also through non-language issues, for instance the participants' way of thinking, believing, feeling (p. 17). These issues were dealt with in the analysis.

Research context and participants

The research project was implemented in a low SES elementary school, in Hungary, where ICT technology is barely provided. However, taking advantage of the brand new supply of tablets, I launched an online EFL communication project between Hungarian teenagers and Japanese university students. Communication sessions took place in the English classroom three times a week, while the virtual classroom space (Edmodo) made it possible for the Japanese partners to join, regardless of time difference. Edmodo, used as an online forum, served as a platform for virtual intercultural exchange, which lasted for five weeks. The school had previous Japanese cultural experience through a picture exchange partnership program; therefore, my attempt was to extend students' authentic experience and to help them benefit both culturally and linguistically from the interactions. Prior to the project teenagers were taught how to use tablets in the IT classes.

The participants were six Hungarian EFL elementary school students from grade 7 and 8. Their ages varied between 13-14. In addition, from Japan, five university students, who are also learners of English, joined the project. For the sake of anonymity, pseudonyms were given for each participant.

Research questions

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do learners' interactions online and in the classroom construct D/discourses about ELF?

2. How does ELF online affect learners' identity construction?

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected in three steps. First, the Hungarian teenagers were asked to answer three audio questionnaires in three time intervals: before the launch of the project, in the middle and at the end. The audio questionnaires were in Hungarian and consisted of 27 statements on a four point Likert scale. Further explanations for their answers were elicited in the recordings. Second, during the project, five English classes were audio recorded and transcribed. Thirdly, learners' posts on the website and their comments served as additional data. Multiple data sources ensure the validity in terms of coverage and agreement, while convergence is achieved by gaining answers to several questions under building tasks (Gee, 1999, pp. 93-94).

Data analysis focused on Fairclough's (2003, p. 27) three aspects of text meaning: representation, action, and identification. Discourse becomes constructed in the representations of reality, it also appears in particular ways of being, and in certain ways of acting and interacting (p. 26). Fairclough (2003) views these aspects of text meaning in relational terms. He focuses on the social agents taking part in the social event and their relation to knowledge (representation), to others (action) and to themselves (identification) (p. 29). I investigated how these are realized in the texts in terms of culture specific vocabulary, agency, sentence functions and types.

Micro and macro analysis of texts followed a two-way process: moving from context to language and from language to context. While exploring situated and strategic online interactions, I looked at the language patterns (discourse with lowercase d) and their situated meanings to see how they connect to social themes and construct Discourse with capital D (Gee, 1999).

Findings and discussion

ELF as a liberating power

Texts revealed a shift where ELF and the website acted as a liberating power, so that Hungarians could express themselves in L2 more freely. At first students were hesitant and anxious towards mistakes and misunderstandings due to prior imbalance of power relations and the dominance of ELF as well as the demand to fulfill native speaker norms. However, as the interactions developed, students relied less on native English norms due to the mutual effort of meaning negotiation on both sides and it provided anxiety free environment. This approach of ELF enabled teenagers to feel more successful in English communication, which boosted their linguistic self-confidence. It also gave them a sense of comfort to express themselves in English, as the following audio questionnaire excerpts illustrate:

Excerpt 1

Emese (prior project): I am a bit scared that I misspell something. They might misunderstand me and I worry about that.

Aliz (during project): I knew that it is not a shame if I make mistakes…They are also learning English, like me.

Emese (after the project): When writing, I have more time to think… And the others help me too.

ELF as an alternation of power relations

In the online written interactions, language bits contain cues for the notion of politeness and respect, humble expressions, especially on the side of Hungarian teenagers. At the beginning of the project Japanese participants were perceived as the source of content and linguistic knowledge, providing the answers for the questions of Hungarians. There was a mismatch in terms of age between Hungarians and Japanese, which might have affected the teenagers' humble way of acting. At first Hungarian students were anxious about expressing themselves in English and they were concerned about making mistakes, however, the threat was weakened by knowing that their communication partners also make mistakes. The spelling of the word "fireworks" in the following online excerpt (See: Excerpt 2) demonstrates this issue. The word "fireworks" was written by Yoshi separately at first and later he revised, as the Hungarian student repeatedly wrote it as one word. Equal opportunities for learning became apparent on both sides, and teenagers' private identities reached the surface as power relations were shifting in the interactions.

In Excerpt 2 agency sheds light on Béla's milieu, which refers to his private identity. In the next turn Yoshi gives a positive evaluative acknowledgement, but he only refers to "he" his stepdad in connection with fireworks. Later he shifts to "you" referring to Béla, when requesting him to teach him how to make fireworks. This is followed by Béla's apology and indirect denial. His self-reference, "I just", carries a humble way of expression. This indirectness shows similarity with Japanese culture specific way of expression.

Excerpt 2

Béla: I and my stepdad make **firework** New Years Eve and make three cannon.

Yoshi: wow, must be huge **fire works**. How long does he need to make **fire works**?

Béla: Some take a couple of hours but it takes a few weeks to prepare. You have training of fireworks in Japan?

Yoshi: We don't have training… we like too see **fireworks**. Can you teach me to make it?

Béla: Sorry, I just prepare the raw material as gunpowder.

ELF as instrument for intercultural contact

First, ELF served as an instrument to get into contact with dissimilar others and to extend their knowledge about Japanese culture, people and language. Also Hungarian students perceived it as an important opportunity to break stereotypes. ELF made it possible for them to reduce the geographical borders and engage in global communication. However, they had to be online in order to use English as lingua franca, therefore, unfortunately Hungarian students did not have equal chances for communication at all times because some students did not have computers and internet access at home.

ELF as instrument for mutual understanding

Japanese students applied various interactional strategies, such as negotiation of linguistic repertoire through framing, paraphrasing, repetition, to achieve mutual understanding. The following online excerpt (See: Excerpt 3) is an example of initiating a cultural expression and based on the lack of contextual cues, Betti at first misinterprets the word "Kanji". Rika provided the verb "master" which means to become proficient in something. This was the only verb provided as cue for Kanji so she came to the conclusion that Kanji is spoken Japanese. After that Rika framed the word to help Betti interpret Kanji and place it in the right context, which is written Japanese. As the interaction developed, Rika applied ELF strategies such as repetition, framing and paraphrasing to achieve common understanding. Betti's last comment indicates that meaning was conveyed the word "Kanji" became shared repertoire.

Excerpt 3

Betti: What is very hard in <u>Japanese language</u>?

Rika: I think <u>Kanji</u> is hard in Japanese language. There is a lot of types of <u>Kanji</u>. And it is more complicated than Hiragana or Katakana. So it is difficult for even Japanese people <u>to master Kanji</u>.

Betti: And how did you learn <u>speak Kanji</u>?

Rika: <u>Kanji</u> is a character like an alphabets. It is also called Chinese character. There are thousands of <u>Kanji</u> you need to learn in order to understand <u>written Japanese</u>. We start learning <u>Kanji</u> from primary school and learn until the end of high school. We learn <u>Kanji</u> by <u>writing</u> repeatedly.

Betti: Yes, I think <u>Kanji</u> is very very difficult. We have <u>alphabet</u>, it's easy. Can you <u>write</u> my name with <u>Kanji</u>?

ELF as cooperation and assistance

At first, the co-construction of the word "import" is apparent from the following online interaction (See: Excerpt 4). Betti modified the word "foreign" to "import" based on the Japanese students' previous sentence, in order to make herself understood. Also " I think" shows some degree of uncertainty, the teenager is careful about providing information. However, her argument about foreign paprika in shops is well informed. On the other hand, Zoli does not want this fact to be known by the Japanese communication partner. The reason may be that losing face as a Hungarian would be really bad. "Paprika" in this interaction serves as a cultural symbol and signals Hungarian identity. Territorial imperative becomes emphasized by Zoli along with cooperative imperative, apparent on the side of Betti and Yoshi.

In the example, Yoshi gives assistance for Hungarian students. He is not relying on other participants' familiarity with the word 'piiman'. Therefore, he frames the word, provides explanation ("green", "slim", "bitter", "looks like paprika"), describes the word to give contextual cues for visual representation of piiman. But he is not sure whether the word piiman for green pepper is universal so he writes: "we call". He signals that the word is used by a certain community of speakers, "we" indicates "Japanese people". With the following cues he assists Hungarian students to place piiman in context and construct meaning.

Béla's last comment signals an attempt to create group membership with the community of Japanese children, when he admits that he does not like paprika similarly to Japanese children. Cooperative imperative is represented by the interpretation of piiman and also the way it became shared repertoire.

Excerpt 4

Yoshi: Why paprika is so famous in Hungary? Because everybody like it?

Béla: The soil be good for the rain and plenty of sunshine for paprika.

Betti: I don't think because most paprika is foreign in shops.

Yoshi: We import paprika from good soil like Hungary.

Betti: But I think most paprika is import in shops.

Zoli: No, Hungarian paprika is very famous. We have delicious paprika.

Yoshi: In Japan we have more common to eat green pepper, which looks like paprika, but more slim. The green pepper we call piiman. Many kids don't like to eat because

of bitter taste.

Béla: Oh, I don't like paprika too.

Territorial imperative appeared in the following online mediated text (See: Excerpt 5 & 6) as Aliz highlighted her experience with the word "pocky", and her knowledge about Japanese traditional clothes: "yukata" and "kimono". She calls attention that the Japanese culture specific words are already within the shared repertoire. By sharing her experience she signals a wish to create group membership with Japanese people. She also acts as an expert who asks questions and tries to elicit another culture specific word, the "kimono".

Assistance on the side of Japanese student is apparent in this excerpt as the participant provides illustrative examples to assist understanding. Takako assumes that her use of cultural reference is unknown to other Hungarian participants, therefore, she immediately provides frames and translation for the Japanese words. At first, she acknowledges the teenagers' claim, to give her confidence, but also revises her knowledge by providing additional frames.

Excerpt 5

Aliz: I ate already pocky! It was chocolate and strawberry! You like pocky? What is your favorite?

Takako: Yes, but there are so many pocky, thin chocolate stick snack, in Japan. It is hard to choose. My favorite Japanese sweets is senbei (rice cracker) which is seasoned with soy sauce and sometimes with nori (seaweed). It's so crunchy a tastes better with green tea ☺

Excerpt 6

Aliz: Yukata is clothes, which must wear a summer festival. ^^ But just summer. In winter something else to wear. You know what?

Takako: Right, that's kimono. Nowadays they wear that mainly on formal occasions like graduation, coming of age ceremony, wedding, funeral. But older people still wear kimono as their everyday clothes. Clothes of kimono are thickly woven and more gorgeous than yukata.

Conclusion

This study approached the topic of ELF in an online communication project between Hungarian and Japanese learners of English, from a CDA perspective. ELF was an emergent Discourse within the online interactions between the participants. The Discourse of ELF was constructed by participants' interactions, negotiation of meaning, use of cultural references, curiosity and their feelings towards being online and towards each other. Situated meanings revealed a shift where ELF and the website acted as a liberating power, thus Hungarians could express themselves in L2 more freely. Japanese applied interactional strategies - estimating age appropriate language, negotiation of linguistic repertoire, paraphrasing, repetition - to achieve mutual understanding. Cooperative and territorial imperatives were balanced, thus learners accommodated to each other while their distinct identities surfaced.

The findings suggest that ELF online should be viewed as a valuable opportunity for students to experience real contact with people from all over the world as it extends geographical and socio-cultural boundaries and prepares students' for global communication practices, empowers them to use English, therefore, such implementations in classroom practices should be encouraged. These activities have the potential to provide the first step in building international relationships and to raise awareness of equality. However, for this to happen schools and students need to be provided with equal opportunities as well, to use ICT technologies. E-learning solutions should be implemented on a national level.

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