JAPANESE-ENGLISH CHAT INTERACTIONS:
LANGUAGE USE IN INTERNET CHAT
日英チャットでの相互作用：インターネットチャットにおける言語使用

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Abstract: Chat can create a natural context for learner independence and identity formation. This study examines the unique linguistic and interactional characteristics of Japanese – English intercultural Internet chat, the ways in which learners use this medium as an opportunity to communicate in their target language, and the strategies chat participants utilize.
Keywords: Japanese, English, Instant Messaging, Language learning, Informal

1. INTRODUCTION

This study aims to examine the characteristics of private, intercultural, and often bilingual Japanese – English intercultural Internet chat outside of the classroom for social and language learning purposes. It also aims to explore the ways in which non-native speakers use this medium as an opportunity for communication with native speakers, and for informal language acquisition. All participants, by chance, used the same software application, the instant messenger MSN Messenger, one form of chat communication (McPherson & Murray, 2003), which was the most popular chat program in Japan and Australia at the time of research. It appears that there have been very few studies of chat examining naturally occurring "authentic interaction" where participants are motivated by reasons other than teacher-directed language learning to participate in chat conversations. Tudini (2003) found that some students engaged in learner-only chat complained that they wanted "someone they could learn from". All of the participants in this study utilized online chat for social interaction, of their own volition, and in their own homes.

Data was gathered from five Australian advanced learners of Japanese, and their five Japanese chat partners, in the form of chat logs, collected over the period of a month. Digitally recorded and then transcribed stimulated recall follow-up interviews with the Australian participants, and follow-up interviews conducted via chat with the Japanese participants were also completed. In both cases, questions were based upon Neustupný (1990) and Neustupný and Miyazaki (2002), and conducted in the participant's native language. The ten chat logs collected were then analysed using Conversation Analysis methods, and the interviews were interpreted in light of a Sociocultural Theoretical framework, to inform the analysis of the chat data.

2. DISCUSSION

A variety of features, including turn management, turn distribution, and textual features, as well as features of language management, were identified and explored. In contrast to previous research on both monolingual and bilingual Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), it was found that the supposed egalitarian nature of chat is dependant upon the histories and motives of participants, rather than being a naturally

occurring feature. Turn-taking in chat was also found to allow for both reading and writing practice, and the kind of flexibility of teacher / learner roles that may be beneficial to learners. A wide variety of orthographic switching methods, including navigating the Input Method Editor using both mouse and keyboard, to type Japanese were found, an area that has been under explored in the body of literature on CMC.

Knowledge of orthographic switching methods was also found to greatly affect language choice and code switching. The use of symbols and chat slang appears to represent a third code choice, related to, but distinct from, the language choices of Japanese and English. A number of strategies for language management were found. Students used repair and negotiation of meaning strategies, to clarify meaning, while one student adopted a proactive strategy to avoid difficult topics. Dictionary use was another interesting aspect, most students used dictionaries to some extent, and it was found that the delayed aspect of Internet chat facilitated dictionary usage. However, two participants were hesitant to interrupt the flow of conversation by using a dictionary.

3. CONCLUSION

Chat was found to provide a positive environment for language learning for the participants in this study. All participants stated that they enjoyed chat communication, and it seems that authentic intercultural chat communication is a fertile area for further investigation. In particular, a number of implications for teaching and learning were found. An overview of the advantages and disadvantages of specific online dictionaries, training in the use of electronic dictionaries, and explicit instruction in ways to ask a partner for language assistance may have been of benefit to students. Some participants were obviously more aware of a greater number of online dictionaries, and the differences between them. Others had difficulty using electronic dictionaries, and most participants used asking their partner as a final resort, when in many cases, it may have been more appropriate and time-saving to ask them first. Yet it is important to recognize that the relationships participants have, and their awareness of the possible disruptive effect on interaction that negotiation of meaning may have greatly influences their willingness to ask one another questions. Providing students with the necessary tools to research chat-specific language and symbols outside the classroom may also be beneficial. Overall, this study was successful in providing a strong groundwork for future research, by identifying a range of ways in which individual participant's histories informed their use of chat, and a number of linguistic and interactional features.

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