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The Effect of Contextual Knowledge on EFL Learners' Participation in Cross-Cultural Communication

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This study examined the role of contextual knowledge in cross-cultural communication between non-native speakers on an interactive web with a bulletin board system through which college students of English at Japanese and Korean universities interacted with each other discussing the topics of local and global issues. The study investigated the influence of students' relative contextual knowledge on active participation in interactions and discussed the results focusing on the use of discourse strategies for meaning negotiation. The study argues that in interactions even between non-native speakers with limited proficiency, contextual knowledge in the topic under discussion affects the degree to which they accommodate to each other during communication and suggests that the focus of teaching English as a foreign language also should be given to what kind of contextual knowledge students need to obtain and how to express it rather than what level of proficiency in English they need to acquire.

[contextual knowledge/e-learning/discourse strategies/meaning negotiation]

I. INTRODUCTION

In the EFL contexts, learners' active involvement in interactions is considered more acquisitionally beneficial than experience limited to a passive reception of language input (Braine, 1998; Zuengler, 1993; Zuengler & Bent, 1991). Active participation means that learners have the opportunities to produce and comprehend language in a current communicative situation and to collaborate in the building and maintenance of the interaction. Through such active participation, learners can develop and exercise their interactional competence (Hatch, 1983; Sato, 1990; Zuengler, 1993). To provide an e-

learning environment has been proved to be effective in active participation for cross-cultural communication (Braine, 1998; Kehrward, 2005).

The relationship between providing e-learning environment and getting opportunities of more successful communication has long been an area of interest to those concerned with teaching and learning foreign languages (Chapelle, 2001; Daiute, 1985; Ferris, 2002; Reid, 2001; Watanabe, 2003; Watanabe & Yoshihara, 2001). The use of electronic communication tool has proved to be effective for teaching English as a foreign language, particularly for students in Asian countries because it provides students an excellent opportunity for real and natural communication environments (Boswood, 1997; Braine, 1998; Dorman and McDonald, 2005; Kehrward, 2005; Sinclair and Davis, 2005; Warschauer, 1999; Yamamoto, 2004; Yoshihara, 2003; Yoshihara, Suzuki, & Watanabe, 2005). Suzuki et.al. (2002) pointed out the necessity for further development of e-learning environments for Asian EFL classes by exploring the e-communication potentiality based on a series of their preceding studies (Suzuki, 2004; Suzuki et al., 1999, 2003, 2004, 2005).

A growing body of research on non-native speakers engaged in interactions has pointed to some characterizations of interactions, particularly when they interact with native speakers (Beebe & Giles, 1984; Holmes, 1985; Harder, 1980; Hatch, 1992; Scarcella, 1983). The research asserts that native speakers' relatively greater proficiency in the language gives them higher interactional status. Even the research on the role of interlocutors' contextual knowledge on active participation focused on interactions of non-native speakers and native speakers (Woken & Swales, 1989; Young & Milanovic, 1992; Zuengler, 1993). Few studies investigated the influence of contextual knowledge on cross-cultural communication between non-native speakers in an e-learning environment.

Therefore, this study used an interactive web with a bulletin board system through which college students of English at Japanese and Korean universities interact with each other discussing the topics of local and global issues. Based on discourse domain model and contextual knowledge model, this study examined the effect of contextual knowledge on cross-cultural communication between non-native speakers in an e-learning environment.

II. CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE AND DISCOURSE DOMAIN

Theories that support the findings that despite the limitations in proficiency, non-native speakers can actively participate in interactions if they have equal or greater contextual knowledge than their interlocutors are Discourse Domain Model by Selinker and Douglas (1985) and Contextual Knowledge Model by Van Dijk (2005). According to discourse domain model, second language learners acquire their language through the domain of discourse, which usually involve specific content areas. That is, second language

development is a function of the learner's domains of content knowledge and interest. Consequently, any given learner's second language development and performance may vary from one discourse domain to another. Content domain knowledge is a relative concept, because it is measured against what the recipients already know. It is crucial for participants that they mutually represent the knowledge of the other participants, because many aspects of discourse depend on what the speaker assumes the hearer to know or not to now. Indeed, whenever the speaker assumes that the hearer knows something, the speaker no longer needs to assert such knowledge, but may tacitly or explicitly presuppose it.

Another well-known insight in the theory of discourse and communication is contextual knowledge model (Clark, 1996; Markman, 1999; Van Dijk, 1999, 2005; Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Van Dijk (1999) proposed that the role of contextual knowledge in discourse processing should be accounted for in terms of mental models of the relevant dimensions of the communicative event or situation, mental models he called "context models" or simply "context" (76).

The study investigated the influence of the students' relative contextual knowledge on active participation in interactions and discussed the results focusing on the use of discourse strategies for meaning negotiation. And the interviews with the participants were conducted after all the discussions between participants to see their reactions toward this on-line communication and their attitude on the role of English for cross-cultural communication.

Most studies on the effect of e-learning environment on cross-cultural communication have centered on findings from processing quantitative data, such as comparing text scores or examining how students' language proficiency improves. However, the results from such data had limitations in investigating the underlying assumptions or reasons. Thus, this study follows both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

III. METHOD AND PROCEDURE

1. Participants

Fifty five students (36 Koreans who registered in a national university in Korea and 20 Japanese from a private university in Japan) participated in on-line discussion through the bulletin board system. All Korean participants majored in English education or English language and literature, and Japanese students were English and computer science majors. Participants from both countries volunteered for the on-line discussion.

Using bulletin board system Japanese students made their video reports about each topic and put them on the web, and then Korean students put their opinions on each report, and students from both countries actively participated in on-line discussion. Japanese students chose nine topics such as "decline in scholastic achievement in Japan", "the tendency of Japanese trend setting", "the electromagnetic wave", "conflicts between different cultures", "runaway boys and girls", "dietary habits in Japan and USA", "need or not? strict internet regulation", "the spreading world on our hand", and "rights and responsibilities from 20 years old " as shown in Figure 1. And Figure 2 shows the bulletin board in which the students saw the video reports and posted their messages.

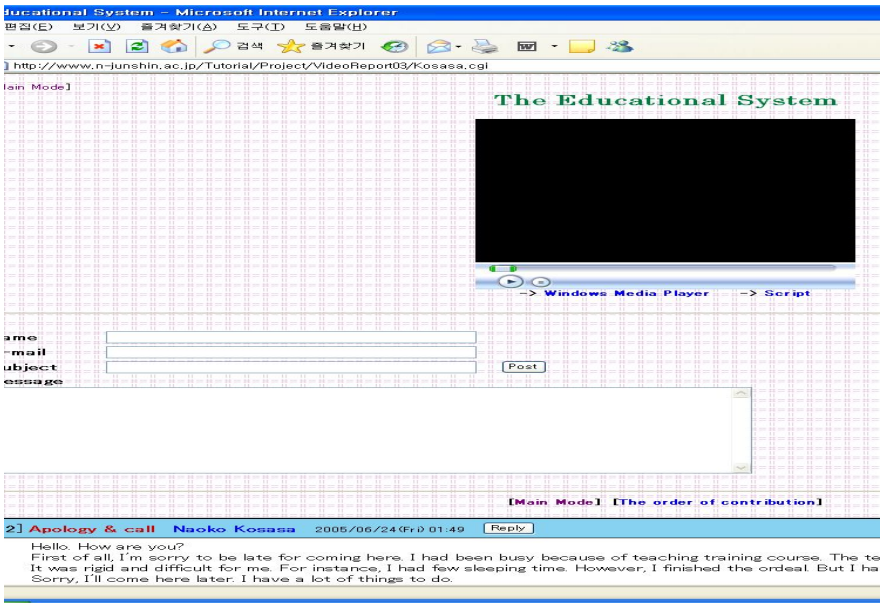
FIGURE 1

Nine topics for on-line discussion on the bulletin board



FIGURE 2

Video reports and messages posted



2. Practicing Interactive Communication

Through the bulletin board system on the web, Japanese students started to discuss the topics with Korean students for two months. Their writing in English was quite good. Among the nine topics two, "need or not? strict internet regulation" and "dietary habits in Japan and USA" are considered under discourse domain because they are the fields students are much concerned about. Students are the Internet generation whose everyday life is connected to the Internet. They have a correct understanding of the good and bad effects of the Internet and also fully aware of a consensus of a growing need for the Internet regulation. Students range in age from 19 to 23. They are also very sensitive to food and dietary habits due to life experience. So it is natural that they have more contextual knowledge in these topics. And another topic, "the tendency of Japanese trend setting", is also very familiar to them because they've got a lot of experience of Japanese pop culture of young generation such as J-pop, the latest fashion they follow, and Korean wave in Japanese culture. So this topic can also be said to be under students' knowledge domain. But the other topics are not under their contextual knowledge domain. This assumption about the discourse knowledge domain was verified from the interviews with the participants.

3. Data Analysis

The communication data was analyzed in both quantitative and qualitative ways. For quantitative analyses, measures of active participation consisted of the number of accesses and messages posted for each topic, the total number of words in messages for each topic, average number of sentences per message. For qualitative analyses, discourse strategies for meaning negotiation are examined such as selecting the appropriate speech act (assertions or questions), presupposed that-clauses, and discourse markers. And the interviews with the participants were conducted.

IV. RESULTS

1. Findings from Data Analyses

The number of accesses and messages indicates a high level of attention and interests by students. For topics that are rather abstract and not in their contextual knowledge domain, students did not join an active discussion.

TABLE 1

Number of accesses and posted messages

Topics	Access	Messages
Decline in scholastic achievement in Japan	88	55
The tendency of Japanese trend setting	172	92
The electromagnetic wave	81	43
Conflicts between difference cultures	74	33
Runaway boys and girls	71	52
Dietary habits in Japan and USA	201	113
Need or not? Strict Internet regulation	167	97
The spreading world on our hands	101	47
Rights and responsibilities from 20 years old	55	28
Total	110	560

As shown in Table 1, there is a big difference in the number of accesses and messages between the topics under students' contextual knowledge domain and the others. The number of messages is much higher for the topics under students' contextual knowledge

domain than the other topics, 92 for "the tendency of Japanese trend setting", 113 for "dietary habits in Japan and USA", and 97 for "need or not? strict Internet regulation".

TABLE 2

Average number of sentences for each topic

Topics	Average number of sentences
Decline in scholastic achievement in Japan	8
The tendency of Japanese trend setting	15
The electromagnetic wave	7
Conflicts between difference cultures	5
Runaway boys and girls	9
Dietary habits in Japan and USA	15
Need or not? Strict Internet regulation	19
The spreading world on our hands	5
Rights and responsibilities from 20 years old	6

Table 2 shows the average number of sentences students wrote per one message for each topic. Still the number is higher for the three topics under students' contextual knowledge domain with "need or not? strict Internet regulation" the highest 19.

TABLE 3

Total number of words in message for each topic

Topics	Words in messages
Decline in scholastic achievement in Japan	5280
The tendency of Japanese trend setting	16560
The electromagnetic wave	3311
Conflicts between difference cultures	1815
Runaway boys and girls	6084
Dietary habits in Japan and USA	14916
Need or not? Strict Internet regulation	22116
The spreading world on our hands	2585
Rights and responsibilities from 20 years old	2016
Total	74683

Table 3 also shows that the total number of words is much higher for the three topics which are under their contextual domain.

2. Discourse Strategies for Meaning Negotiation

Qualitative analyses showed that if students believe their interlocutors share the contextual knowledge, they participate in discussion more actively. And the kind of discourse strategies the students use not only depends on what they know, but also on what they believe their interlocutors know. It's because many aspects of discourse depend on what the participants assume their interlocutors to know or not to know. In other words, participants do not need to express knowledge if their interlocutors already know something. As Morley(2001) argued, a variety of question types can be used in negotiation of meaning process. Students used the measures of interactional negotiation, namely, repetition, clarification requests, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks. When used, they are a means of showing the interlocutor's participation in the sharing of meaning (Pica, Holliday, Lewis, & Morgenthaler, 1989; Zuengler, 1993; van Dijk 2005).

The negotiation of meaning process through the communication between students from the two countries also triggered intra-national communication between Korean students who didn't know each other before they participated in this project. There's no communication breakdown or misunderstanding in interactions between them.

The following messages are the communication exchanges among Japanese students and Korean students in on-line bulletin board.

[1]

Hi Asami. I'm J. S. Feel free to call me Jenny. Well, I've read your article. It was quite interesting to me. **As you mentioned above**, the problem of the tendency of young people trend setting, it's getting worse. This problem is not only in Japan but also in Korea. I know that Japanese really like fashion things. Nowadays it is one of the big social problem in Korea. What is worse, high school students work at night clubs, karaokes after school to make money because they want to buy expensive things and show themselves through their bags, shoes, and clothes. I think that more and more young people are losing their sense of identity and confidence by brand names. I wish that young people have confidence in themselves. **What is your solution for this problem? I want to know your opinion. I'll wait for your answer**.

[2]

Hi, Jenny! Thank you for your writing. **To be sure, the women of Osaka like super brand.** Especially they love CHANEL. **I read your writing and thought that Korea and**

Japan are truly alike. Also in Japan, how to earn money among Japanese high school students became a social problem several years ago. This problem is big so it is difficult to find solution. For them, it is definite aim in their life. Um... **it's difficult for me to find solution. How do you think? Do you have a good solution for this problem**?

[3]

You mentioned fashion, cell phone, and pet dogs as the present tendency of your country. I can see the similar tendency in Korea. Actually I don't usually use cell phone. But cell phones are so popular in Korea, and it's like becoming a thing indispensable to life. Connection between people seems to become stronger. **Is this true? Well, I'm skeptical for the answer**. And **you asked what I think about some American students even coming school with pajamas**. Well, actually I can't imagine what kind of pajamas they wear, **if Pajamas is just clothes you wear when you sleep**...?

The above exchanges show that students use some discourse strategies for meaning negotiation such as repetition, clarification requests, and comprehension checks. That means, students dynamically change common ground of knowledge by selecting the appropriate speech acts like questions (for clarification or comprehension) and reminding markers such as "as you mentioned above", "you asked what I think...". Students also ask their interlocutors' opinion on what they told repeatedly as a strategy to facilitate their interlocutor's response and active participation.

The following messages are the communication exchanges which show more discourse strategies used for meaning negotiation.

[8] Internet regulation - right or not?

Your presentation is very wonderful and deep thinking, I know that Korea is famous for internet-using, maybe the most popular nation. **Do you know that?** as a result, it causes a big problem and we need the internet regulation.

[9]

Thank you for your reply. I'll tell about solution for the internet problem. To solve the problem, government must make a strong regulation or law. If it can't solve the problem, a special device has to be made at company. A device must capture a lot of internet criminal. This is my thought. **How about your thought? Especially I want to know Japan's situation. I'll wait for your reply**.

[10]

I think proper internet regulation is needed though it is hard to define what "proper" regulation is. **Do you understand what I am saying? My opinion on the reason why the strict regulation is needed is the same as in your country? I mean in Japan do people see chocking pictures to show up suddenly and hear bad words in the internet?**

[11] Hello!

Your opinion is "to keep freedom, limits are important", isn't it? Yes, that's true. Recently, also in Japan, there are some happenings of leaking of private information. But in Japan, the complete measures for defence for it are taken only on the individual level and the company level. The government hasn't made the law about it het. So many people are holding uneasiness to it.

The exchanges also show that students use repetition, clarification checks, several questions for comprehension and reminding markers. In the third and fourth messages, the students used clarification checks and questions for comprehension repeatedly as a kind of communication strategy for meaning negotiation and facilitated their interlocutors' active participation.

As a whole, the messages posted under the topic, "dietary habits in Japan and USA", showed that students use long sentences of and have a quite strong opinion about food in western countries and its effect on the dietary habits in Japan and Korea. They made an assertion that food represented by Mc hamburgers is not a nutritionally balanced diet. Even though they enjoy having fast food, they know what kind of problems their dietary habit may cause. They believe that traditional Korean and Japanese food is a healthy and balanced diet. Students did not need to use a variety of discourse strategies for meaning negotiation because they are quite confident of their thought and what they believe.

For the topic of "need or not? strict internet regulation", a large number of messages were posted, but relatively small number of words were used. And there are several topic moves. Students are the netizen in the Internet era when people all around the globe communicate and get information through the internet on an unprecedented scale. They are the most frequent users of the Internet and at the same time experience the bad effect of writing a message or talking to people anonymously on the Internet. Generally, they agree the need of the set of rules about behaviour on the Web. But to restrict the right of speech without being limited on the Web is still highly controversial. So in that sense they can be said to have quite a good contextual knowledge about this topic. Students use some interactional strategies including many questions which facilitate their interlocutor's active participation. When students think they don't have enough to tell or they are not quite confident about what they're talking about, they just initiate topic moves. As for the topic

of "the tendency of Japanese trend setting", there was a large amount of content per message and some interactional strategies. Korean students have got a lot of experience of Japanese pop culture such as J-pop, the latest fashion trend they follow, Korean wave in Japanese culture. In expressing their opinions, both Korean and Japanese students have so many things to talk about.

For the other six topics, the students relatively less actively participated. As for “runaway boys and girls in Japan” and “decline in scholastic achievement in Japan”, there was active participation among Japanese students, that is intra-national communications, but Korean students showed relatively less active participation. It's because they are domestic issues of Japan. Korean students did not have much contextual knowledge about the social issues in Japan and did not show interests in them. As for the rest of the topics, both Korean and Japanese students showed relatively less active participation.

3. Interviews with Students

The interviews with Korean and Japanese students who participated in the on-line discussion were conducted after all the interactions between participants to see their attitude toward this on-line communication and the role of English for cross-cultural communication. The interviews revealed that students participated more actively when they are talking about what they have more knowledge, and they learned how to negotiate meaning when they face problems either in language itself or in the content of discussion.

The interviews also revealed that students became aware of English as a medium of global communication and it is not just a medium of communication with native speakers of English. Their attitude toward English is revealed in the following statements from Korean students.

[A]

In the beginning, it's not easy to talk with a foreign student who I do not know. But as I participate in the discussion, I found myself enjoying discussion and this kind of communication with another non-native speaker like me. Though, my English is not quite good, I had no problem in communicating in English. I learned a lot about Japan from Japanese students.

[B]

Usually I don't feel so comfortable to talk to foreigners because I have to use English. It's worse to talk to non-native English speakers like me. But since I participated this project, I found myself more confident in speaking in English and I also found it's quite good experience to communicate with Japanese students in English. I know we made many

grammatical errors and sometimes faced some communication problems. But I think we learned how to get over the problems through negotiations.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of study show that even though students have limited oral and writing skills (relatively low proficiency in English), their contextual knowledge can explain the apparent differences in their participation in cross-cultural communication. That is students more actively participated in discussion of topics that are in their contextual knowledge domain. The study therefore supports the relationships of relative contextual knowledge to their participation in cross-cultural communication. When they actively participated in on-line communication, they used several discourse strategies for meaning negotiation such as repetition, clarification requests, confirmation questions, and comprehension questions.

Students made many errors in their writing. Some of the errors are common to any type of production by learners of English as a second or foreign language. But others seem to be peculiar to this type of communication, that is, online discussion. Online discussion might take a middle position between spoken and written language. For example, the use of fragmented sentences, connective words, and punctuation that could be more flexible or absolutely free from rules in spoken language was found in students' writing. And some functional errors were found which belong to the scope of pragmatics. However, these did not led to communication breakdown at all. Students succeeded in negotiation of meanings by dynamically changing discourse strategies, for instance by selecting appropriate speech acts and conversational markers.

What the results clearly suggest is that when students are engaged in discussing or talking about something that they have more contextual knowledge, their knowledge can override any limitations they may have in their language proficiency, and enable them to be the active participants in interactions. In so doing, learners can develop and exercise their interactional competence.

The results also suggest that the focus of teaching and learning English as a foreign language also should be given to what kind of knowledge students need to obtain and how to express it rather than what level of proficiency in English they need to acquire or how to teach English, that is, a variety of teaching methods.

In the past decade, recognition has grown of the important relationship between language learning and content knowledge. It is essential to conduct research to determine what the relationship actually is, and how content knowledge influences both language development and performance.

From the interviews with students, it was found that English is used as a medium of global communication among the students in expanding Circle, that is in the countries where English is used as an important foreign language. And the use of electronic communication tool is effective for learning and practicing English, particularly for students in Asian countries because it provides students an excellent opportunity for real, natural communication environment.

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Examples in: English
Applicable Languages: English
Applicable levels: Tertiary

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