

How the Asian students make requests in an online synchronous discussion?

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Abstract

This paper examines how Chinese and Japanese university students carry out their making requests during small group discussions in a synchronous computer mediated communication (hereafter, CMC) context. The purpose of the paper is to figure out characteristics of the Asian university students' ways of making requests in a synchronous CMC context. Two online discussions were video-recorded through the internet, transcribed, and analyzed qualitatively as well as quantitatively in Japan. All utterances related to making requests were coded based on the scheme of Discourse Completion Tasks (hereafter, DCTs) in the field of speech act, which was originally adopted by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) and adapted by Nakano et al (2009) and Nakano et al (2010) for use in CCDL context. The result showed that each group had used different requestive strategies. Group A consisting of male with slightly higher language proficiency and having a smooth interaction had used more indirect mode (hearer-oriented) and less direct mode (speaker-oriented) of requestive strategies. Whereas, Group B consisting of female with slightly lower language proficiency comparing to Group A had used more direct mode of requestive strategies and frequent sound checking confirmation.

Keywords

CCDL, speech act, and online discussion, CMC

Introduction

In the study of synchronous online discussions, little research has been done towards making requests by obtaining authentic conversation data. This study was attempted to explore Asian students' characteristics of utterances in making requests in a synchronous CMC as a case study by selecting two groups in the CCDL classes, International Career Path and Social and Global Issues. There are reasons to investigate the study. Firstly, analyzing how the students communicate with others effectively in CCDL context is an important key to

find out how to be a good communicator. Learning such social skills offered in the university courses will be beneficial to the students preparing their future work in a social context and it could be one of the short cut ways for them to realize cultural differences or similarities across the national boundary. The study about students' weekly self-evaluation questionnaire towards skills (Watanabe and Karseras, 2009) demonstrated that Japanese students tended to be more receptive rather than expressive in the way they communicated with students in Taiwan. As the course progressed, "an increase average rate of skills use with decreasing SD" shows their similar evaluation of themselves, possibly having "a common goal with partners involved in a discussion or even with wider cross-cultural norms" (渡辺, 2009 and Watanabe & Karseras, 2009, p.243). It could be considered that analysis of students' use of skills in CCDL may help the way of evaluating online discussion as well as developing organization of the course itself. Secondly, analyzing students requestive strategies could be a useful tool to examine the quality of group discussion. The study reported that the total number of skill use in making requests based on transacts coding during three sequence discussions increased most in the CCDL (Watanabe, 2010). Focusing on the utterances of making requests therefore could be effective as its course encourages each student to take a facilitator role at least two times in the course.

1 Methodology

Methodology used in this paper was qualitative as well as quantitative. In order to examine students' requestive utterances, discussions in two groups were video-recorded and transcribed. The data in these groups were possibly regarded from same population as the total number of turn taking, M (median) and SD (standard deviation) of the total number of words per turn in each group was no significant difference, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The total number of turn taking, its median and standard deviation of the total number of words per turn taking in each group

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Group A	288	11.98	2.65
Group B	319	11.28	3.93

Note: *N* represents the total number of turn taking happened in each group discussion. *M* represents the median of the number of words per turn and *SD* represents the standard deviation of the number of words per turn in each group.

1.1 Participants

Participants were the students who were taking the CCDL courses (2 Japanese and 7 Chinese students). Group A consisted of female (1 Japanese and 4 Chinese), whereas Group B consisted of male (1 Japanese and 3 Chinese). Around 50-minute discussions in two groups were transcribed (3300 words for Group A and 3286 words for Group B) and analyzed based on the utterances of making requests.

1.2 Coding Scheme

Nakano's DCTs coding scheme was used, whose scheme was initially developed by Blum-Kuluka and Kasper's CCSARP project (1989), and adopted (Nakano et al, 2009 and Nakano et al, 2010). Three subcategories (Sound checking, Repetition the former interlocutor mentioned, and Possibility of the request such as "you can open the white board") were added to fit the context by referencing Aijmer's coding scheme (1996). Although the scheme is basically for a use of DCTs, it could be applicable to analyze authentic utterances in the CCDL, as it was mainly produced for the purpose of evaluating students' degree of understanding towards cross-cultural issues in the CCDL.

2 Result and Discussion

Similar and different requestive characteristics could be seen in the two groups. Frequent use of hearer oriented indirect mode and less use of speaker oriented direct mode in their requestive strategies were seen in the utterances of Group A. Whereas, their use of speaker oriented direct mode and slightly less use of indirect mode in the requestive strategies were seen in the utterances of Group B. As similar characteristics, the students in both groups used attention getter naming the interlocutor; however their ways of use were different. The students in Group A frequently addressed the terms after interrogatives at the end of the request (e.g., "so please, can you answer J?" in turn108, "good answer! How do you think, A, J's answer?, turn114). This was because they were

confused about to whom a interlocutor should answer at the beginning of the discussion and tried avoiding such confusion by addressing the address term, which made the discussion smoothly. On the other hand, the students in Group B frequently used the address term at the beginning of the utterance, which might make the discussion more difficult as frequent overlaps and interruptions in the middle of the conversation occurred. This demonstrates delicate matter of time lag that synchronous online discussion has may have some effect on their requestive strategies.

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