A qualitative Analysis of a Collaborative Writing Activity in a Junior High School Classroom

In recent years, it has been stated that interactional competence, not individual language competence, is the crucial for successful communication. Kramsch (1986) proposes “redirecting the enthusiasm generated by the proficiency movement toward a push for interactional competence” (p. 370). Furthermore, after the appearance of the Firth and Wager article in 1997, L2 learners have not been seen as persons with deficiency in communicative skills. In this framework, general language competence does not exist, but only local, context-specific competence exists, and the development of learners’ L2 occurs in their participation and engagement the communicative interactions. Moreover each student’s process of learning and interaction can be resources for all learners. All of the participants can co-exist reciprocally in the learning situation.

This research started with the question of what the real goal of learning English in junior high school classrooms should be. In looking at the current state of the EFL situation, we have noticed that stressing skill development as a “tool for communication” might be out of touch with the students’ need and also that the real meaning of language, development of the self, has been ignored. One more concern is that Japanese learners spend much of their lesson time for writing on rote learning and repetitive drills. English writing lessons lacks in communicativeness, and creativity is taken away from learners. To tackle this two-fold problem of our English learning and teaching practice, I conducted the experimental classes based on the aforementioned sociocultural perspective to propose a better learning instruction.

First, the lack of communicativeness in writing activities led the author into the idea of bringing interactional elements into the experimental activity. If the students have real addressivity, as Bahktin proposes, the nature of static activity and their attitude toward learning English will change. We assume that the close observation of their activity will reveal what is occurring in their learning; how they interact, how they learn and how they change through it. One more thing that is expected in this activity is to establish a connection between writing and thinking. Language is a means of thinking. The students should be given more opportunities to think through their language learning.

The experimental classes were conducted on the second graders of a junior high school. They engaged in Interactive Writing Activity and wrote down the retrospective feedback in Japanese after each activity. There is also data to help explain their mindset and attitude toward learning.

In the first chapter, some concepts are interpreted by the author; collaborative learning, agency, self and identity based on the sociocultural perspective. All these are connected with each other in learning, and each of them is a decisive element for successful learning. We have multiple identities which have been constructed culturally and historically. As van Lier (2007) points out “identities are ways of relating the self to the world” (p. 58), we face other people or society with the identities which are chosen for the situation. The identities we have in learning come to be significant since it affects the
learners’ mindset and the way of participating in social activities. Wiley (1994) says that “good identities are the overall self”’s bridge to the world (p. 36). Consequently, it leads the learners’ self to reconstruction and renewal. The way of participating in social activity relies on the degree of agency, that is, how they commit themselves to the activities.

In chapter 2, the procedure of the main research is explained. The activities are conducted so as to be not only communicative but also interactive. We have to keep in mind that communication is not always collaborative and reciprocal, that is, learners’ degree of agency is a decisive element for the nature of interaction. The original idea of this activity was inspired by an activity conducted by Fujita (2006), in which the focus of her survey was put on students’ appropriation of other students’ language use.

In Chapter 3, the data from the activities and their feedback are analyzed in different ways. First, the students’ written exchange is examined from the standpoint of its structure; what role each turn plays in the interaction. In the activities, students are fully aware of their interlocutors, and come to write sentences which have some conversational functions. Students’ English is still rough and undeveloped in vocabulary and grammar, but they used it with their feeling in a real communicative interaction. For example, the emergence of sympathy can be seen as evidence of their real interaction and real learning.

One more issue covered in Chapter 3 is identity. In collaborative learning, students are assumed to have different identities from the conventional ones in a teacher-learner relationship in classrooms. They exist as co-learners in classrooms. With the new, temporary identity in learner-learner relationships, the students’ English shows subtle but interesting features of emerging real feeling and empathy.

Next, students’ writing is examined from the viewpoint of the connection of turns. Observation of the way of turns connect has made us notice that there are various patterns of interacting. Some cases show that the students succeed in eliciting the feeling of the interlocutor. We teachers tend to focus on learning outcomes and evaluate them. In this way of approaching the students’ learning, we often miss their real intentions or real thinking. We should notice that to see the process of interaction is significant for understanding what is occurring in their learning.

In the last section, the students’ retrospective feedback is analyzed by the KJ Method. In this data, students’ mindset during activities is expressed explicitly. In comparing the feedback which was written after the first activity and the one after the last activity, the change of their attitude toward learning English is displayed. During the activities, the students have come to know sense of real English usage, the pleasure of getting to know others, and moreover they show indication that their selves have changed through the interaction.

In EFL classrooms, students’ motives and aims vary in many ways. The close observation of their interaction shows what is important for a better learning situation and what is to be aimed at. They can learn by their own participation in interactive activities, and their way of interacting and the way of learning itself is a language resource for them. Language learning is not just an acquisition of skills or an internalization of fixed knowledge. Learning through interaction with others is the issue of the self. This research tells us that not to evaluate, but understand their learning is the way to make better learning situation.