

ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF ORAL PERFORMANCES OF JAPANESE AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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This paper presents an ethnographical discourse analysis of the oral performances of advanced learners of Japanese in an American university. Two tape-recorded oral presentations were assessed by utilizing the concepts of framing (Johnson, 1996), situational relevancy (Johnson, 1996), textual sphere (Johnson, 1994, 1996; Johnson & Evans, 1995), and contextual sphere (Johnson, 1994, 1996; Johnson & Evans, 1995). The analysis reveals that learners are successful in displaying competent performances, drawing on textual and contextual spheres. However, the analysis also reveals that learners are not consistent in framing and maintaining situational relevancy. It is shown that the concepts utilized in the present study provide a valuable means of describing and evaluating dynamic processes of oral performances of second language learners.

INTRODUCTION

Second language (L2) researchers and instructors are greatly interested in ways to assess the language use of L2 learners. The principle of text-context performance orientation (Johnson, 1994; Johnson & Evans, 1995; Johnson, 1996) suggests that textual and contextual spheres are valuable concepts to assess second language learner's language use in the classroom. The textual sphere, according to Johnson (1994, p. 191), refers to authoritative texts such as written texts, and the contextual sphere refers to knowledge about life in the classroom, school, and so on. Johnson and Evans (1995) have stated: "Communicative competence in classroom language 'performance' involves being able to draw appropriately on resources from both textual and contextual spheres" (p. 54).ⁱ In other words, how the learners utilize the textual and the contextual spheres in their classroom performances is a crucial aspect for assessing the language use of second language learners.ⁱⁱ

In addition to the notions of textual and contextual spheres, Johnson (1996) has reviewed analytical concepts which have been utilized in the study of performance and has suggested the applications of these concepts to studies of language use in language education. For example, framing is, according to Johnson (1996, p. 5), a way that the speaker gives definition to people, to situations, to events, and to what is going on, which provides guidelines for interpreting an event. Bauman (1993) has claimed that how responsibly the performer displays his/her competent performance depends on how successfully the performer frames or keys an event in the performance. For example, according to Bauman (1993), the way to frame a narrative by using the word such as 'I heard' at the beginning and at the end makes the audience think that he/she is unwilling to assume responsibility for telling the narrative to the audience.

Situational relevance is another key concept for judging the language performance of second language learners. Johnson (1996) has stated that when a performance is appropriate and comprehensible to the intended audience, it is judged as a competent performance (Johnson, 1996). For example, humor in student talk would be situationally relevant if "it moves in the same direction as the teacher's goal" (Johnson, 1996, p. 4). Competent performances are dependent on how carefully the learners consider contexts such as the characteristics of tasks in their language performances.

The present study was based on the ethnographical observation and discourse analysis of linguistic performances in a classroom of foreign language (FL) learners. In the present study, I

assessed the oral performances of learners of Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) at an American university. More specifically, their oral presentations were analyzed by utilizing the concepts of framing (Johnson, 1996), situational relevancy (Johnson 1996), textual sphere (Johnson, 1994, 1996; Johnson & Evans, 1995), and contextual sphere (Johnson, 1994, 1996; Johnson & Evans, 1995) in order to see how they display competent performances during presentations in a JFL classroom. I first discuss the description of the study followed by the analyses of oral presentations by the JFL learners. Since, as far as I know, JFL or Japanese as a second language (JSL) classroom-oriented studies of performance are very few, the present study is exploratory for the language acquisition study of JSL/JFL.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Description of the Japanese class

The data for the analysis of the present study were collected in an advanced JFL class at an American university. This class met three times a week in the morning. The students had to take another advanced class as a prerequisite to this class. For those who could not take the prerequisite class for some reason, they had to pass a placement test in order to enroll in this class. However, as far as I observed, the proficiency levels of the students in this class varied considerably.

The classroom was a medium-sized, rectangular room in which about 50 people could be accommodated, but the classroom seemed too large for the 12 students in this class. There was no window in the classroom, and the two entrance doors were located in the back of the room. There was a relatively large aisle-like space on both sides, through which the instructor and the students walked in and out of the classroom. There was one large blackboard at the front and one small blackboard on the right side of the room, both of which the instructor used during my observation. One large television and one brand-new video recorder mounted in a steel rack were located at the front left side. An overhead projector was located at the front right side. There was one large table and one chair for the instructor at the front of the classroom. Most of the chairs in the classroom came with a small desk, and they were all were fixed to the floor. These chairs were arranged in eight rows; five chairs were in the first row, and six chairs in the rest of the rows. There were also some chairs on both sides and at the back of the classroom, and these were not fixed to the floor.

The class was taught by a male Japanese instructor. Each of the three times I observed, he entered the classroom, saying *ohayoogozaimasu* 'Good morning' in a lively voice, and his voice was loud enough to be able to be heard even at the back of the classroom. There were twelve students in this class, seven male and five female students. Nine of them were Americans, and the others were from China, Germany, and Mexico. Two particular male students always sat in the first row and the others usually sat in from the second row to the sixth row. Some students often came late or sometimes were absent. The students seemed to enjoy the class very much.

The textbook for this class was *Japanese: The Spoken Language (part 3)* by Jorden and Noda (1990). The purposes of this class, according to syllabus, were as follows: (a) to further develop socially appropriate communication skills, which the students have learned in previous Japanese courses; (b) to be able to speak intelligently and in a sophisticated manner by using hard words such as *kango*, which are borrowed from Chinese; (c) to be able to read and understand an abstract argument in a book or an article; and (d) to be able to explain and discuss

the content of the readings in their own words. Most activities were mainly based on exercises in the textbook and controlled by the instructor. Furthermore, during the class, the instructor never spoke English, which is the rule of this class, and he spoke Japanese at a natural speed.

Description of oral presentation

I focused on one particular speech event, the oral presentation, for the analysis of the present study. Each student chose one short article from a Japanese newspaper or a magazine for the discussion topic in the class. The article, according to the syllabus, should be appropriate in terms of the content, the level of difficulty of the language, and the overall length. The presenter had to get approval for the article from the instructor beforehand, and he/she gave the article to his/her classmates approximately one week prior to the presentation. During the preparation period, the presenter was supposed to become an expert on this article as well as the topic of the article. Furthermore, the presenter prepared questions about the content words, *kanji*, and grammar, which he/she was going to ask the audience during the presentation. The rest of the students were also supposed to read and understand the article at home.

During the presentation, the presenter, facing the classmates at the front, first summarized the article briefly and then asked a couple of questions in Japanese to the students who sat from the first row to the sixth row in the classroom. As far as I could observe, each presenter read notes that he/she prepared in advance for this occasion. The presenter asked various questions to the audience. For example, one presenter asked the audience a wh- question, regarding the content of the article such as *Chuugoku to furansu wa sono kaigi ni tsuite doo omoimashita ka* 'What did China and France think about it?'. Another presenter asked the audience a question which required them to answer based on their own knowledge or experience, such as *Nihon to amerika no konbini wa doo chigau to omimasu ka* 'How different do you think is *konbini* 'convenience store' in Japan and *konbini* in the United States?'. The presenter could either ask for a volunteer or call on a specific student to answer the questions.

During the presentation, the instructor assumed the role of an observer as well as of a facilitator. He sat among the class and carefully observed the presentation. He gave encouraging comments to the presenter such as *Ii shitsumon desu ne!* 'A good question!' very frequently and added comments about the content of an article. He also asked questions to the presenter to confirm if the presenter fully understood the article.

Research Questions

Based on the four notions, framing (Johnson, 1996), situational relevancy (Johnson, 1996), textual sphere (Johnson, 1994, 1996; Johnson & Evans, 1995), and contextual sphere (Johnson, 1994, 1996; Johnson & Evans, 1995), I constructed the following research questions to describe their oral performances in detail:

1. Does the presenter frame questions? Since the activity mainly consists of a series of questions to the students, whether he/she frames each question is crucial for displaying a competent performance to the audience. By doing so, the presenter can not only make the transition to the next question known to them but also fulfill his/her own responsibility to the students and the instructor. For example, the utterance such as *Dewa tsugi no shitsumon ni ikimasu* 'Then, I'll go to the next question.' frames another question and helps the students and the instructor prepare for it.

2. Can the presenter use formal expressions? Since the situation in this activity is rather formal, I looked at whether the presenter can maintain the formal verb forms *desu* and *masu*,

which, according to Jorden and Noda (1987), denote formality compared to the direct verbal form such as *u*. By doing so, the performance of the presenter can accomplish situational relevance.

3. Can the presenter draw on the textual sphere in the presentation? In this presentation, since he/she was supposed to be an expert on the content of the article, I looked at how the presenter displayed some knowledge about the article in his/her utterance whenever necessary. For example, the utterance such as *Kono kiji ni yore ba* ‘According to this article’ indexes the textual sphere, which reveals one important aspect for a competent performance of the presenter.

4. Can the presenter draw on the contextual sphere in the presentation? Since the presenter sometimes had to answer questions by the students as well as the instructor based on his/her own experience, drawing on the contextual sphere was also important for the display of a competent performance by the presenter. For example, a question such as *sore ni tsuite doo omoimasu ka* ‘what do (you) think about it?’ makes the presenter think in terms of both the content of the article and his/her own ideas about the article. The verb *omoimasu* ‘I think’ indexes the contextual sphere based on the respondent’s experiences.

PROCEDURES

I observed and tape-recorded the presentations. I chose the presentations of two male students for the analysis of the present study. While tape-recording the presentations, I made notes on the presenter as well as the audience. I sat in the chair in the second row in the left corner of the classroom. I put the microphone in my bag on the chair beside me, doing my best not to bother the presenter. Later, I transcribed a part of these presentations for the transcription conventions based on Du Bois et al. (1993)ⁱⁱⁱ.

Analyses of oral presentations of JFL learners

Bart

Bart was a male undergraduate student. He had studied Japanese for four years. He had never been to Japan, so he learned Japanese only by attending classes as well as talking with Japanese friends who studied at the university. The theme for his presentation was *konbini* ‘convenience store’. He chose one article about *konbini* from a Japanese magazine in which various types of convenience stores in Japan were introduced. For example, some Japanese convenience stores were accompanied by a gas station like those in the United States. The convenience stores in the 21st century was also discussed in the article. The presentation lasted about twenty minutes. During the presentation, Bart spoke Japanese slowly enough for other students to keep up. However, his voice was rather weak, and the tape-recorder sometimes could not pick up his voice.

Bart asked six questions and framed the questions twice. He successfully drew on the textual as well as the contextual sphere. The following excerpt is from the introductory part of Bart’s oral presentation.

Excerpt (1)

- 1 B: ano saisho boku wa mada nihon ni itta koto ga nai kedo ano kore o ano yondara
- 2 ano omoshiroi to omoimashita. ano chotto amerika no to chigai masu.
- 3 ano XXX chigau XXX ano u=n ano nihon un kono kiji o ano minasan yonda
- 4 kara nani ga chigaimasuka? ano amerika no kobini to nihon no konbini to
- 5 nani ka chigai wa arimasuka?

- 6 T: <WH ii shitsu mon desu ne ne WH> ii desu yo kiite kudasai daredemo ii desu
7 yo. darede mo iikara kiite kudasai.

English Translation

- 1 B: Well, at first, though I have never been to Japan, I found it interesting when
2 reading this article. It is a bit different from that in the United States. Well,
3 XXX, different, XXX, well, uh, well, Japan, uh, since everyone has read this
4 article, what is the difference? Is there any difference between the
5 convenience store in the United States and in Japan?
6 T: <WH A good question, isn't it? WH> (You) can ask anybody, you can.
7 Ask anybody (you) want.

In (1), Bart tries to ask the audience a question about differences between the convenience stores in the United States and in Japan preceded by stating his reaction to the article.

Bart displayed a competent performance in terms of framing questions, situational relevance, and the textual and the contextual sphere in (1). For example, in line 1 and 2, Bart successfully drew on the contextual sphere. He said that *Ano kore o ano yondara ano omoshiroi to omoimashita. Ano chotto amerika no to chigaimasu* 'I found it interesting when reading this article. It is a little bit different from that in the United States'. Both *omoimashita* 'I thought' in the first part of this utterance and *chigaimasu* 'it is different' in the second part of this utterance indexed his reaction based on his knowledge about the convenience store in the United States. Furthermore, this utterance, as well as the following utterance *kono kiji o ano minasan yonda kara* 'since everyone has read this article' (lines 3 and 4), indirectly framed the question about differences between convenience stores in the United States and in Japan. These utterances made the audience anticipate the coming question about the difference between convenience stores. In addition, Bart's performance in the introduction seemed situationally relevant because he used the distal style of a verb form *masu* most of the time. Therefore, Bart displayed a competent performance in (1).

In spite of a good performance in the introduction, Bart could not sustain a competent performance throughout the presentation. For example, in the following excerpt (2), Bart sometimes showed a competent performance but did not do so at other times.

Excerpt (2)

- 1 B: ano nihon jin no tomodachi ni yoru to un nihon no un konbiniensu suupaa wa
2 amerika yori semai ano= kono kiji ni yoru to ano hitotsu no mondai wa un ...
3 <WH doko datta ka wakaranai WH> demo ano a= tsuuro wa tsuuro wakaruu?
4 ano=
5 T: yoku aruku tokoro desu ne.
6 B: wa totemo semai kara ano= kokode ano= un nihon go de wasurechatta no ano
7 akachan o ano
8 T: [ubaguruma]
9 B: [tsumeru tame no]
10 T: kaato mitai na mono.
11 B: soo <X kaitearu hito no X> demo kono kiji ni yoru to ano ano ano konbini de
12 tsuuro wa ano totemo semai kara ano kaato o tsukawanai kara ano shoora no
13 wa tsuuro wa motto ano ima no benkyoo shiteinai kotoba tsukatta no yuttari?
14 T: yuttari

15 B: yuttari nan- nan to yuu imi da to omoimasu ka?

English Translation

- 1 B: Well, according to my Japanese friend, Japanese convenience stores are smaller
 2 than American convenience stores. And according to this article, one of
 3 problems is that,
 4 well, ... <WH I don't remember where it is WH>, but, well, an
 5 aisle, aisle, do you know?
 6 T: (Is it) where we often walk along, right?
 7 B: (One problem) is that since (the aisle) is very narrow, well, here, I forgot how
 8 they say in Japanese, things that carry a baby...
 9 T: [a buggy]
 10 B: [to stuck the baby]
 11 T: things like a cart.
 12 B: Yes. <X the writer's X>, but, according to this article, well, in the
 13 convenience store, the aisle is very narrow, so they don't use a cart, and in the
 14 near future, at the convenience store, the aisle will become more, well,
 15 "yuttari", a vocabulary which we did not learn yet?
 16 T: "yuttari" (spacious).
 17 B: What do you think "yuttari" means?

In (2), Bart tried to frame a question about the meaning of *yuttari* 'spacious' by trying to use the contextual sphere as well as the textual sphere. Here, in the first part of line 1, Bart's attempt to draw on the contextual sphere was successful. His utterance *nihon jin no tomodachi ni yoru to* 'according to my Japanese friend', indexed the contextual sphere. By using these contextual features, he was able to bring in his Japanese friend's remark that *nihon no un konbiniensu suupaa wa amerika yori semai* 'the Japanese convenience store is smaller than the American' (lines 1 and 2).

His subsequent attempt to draw on the textual sphere, however, failed. He tried to point out one of the problems of the Japanese convenience store by using a picture of the article. However, he could not find where the picture was, and he murmured to himself *doko datta ka wakaranai* 'I don't remember where it is' (line 3). Note that his Japanese became situationally irrelevant; he used the direct style of a verb form such as *wakaranai*. Here, he should have said *wakarimasen* which includes the distal form *masu*. In addition, he could not come up with a Japanese word in the article which corresponds to a buggy, and he again said *wasurechatta* 'I forgot' (line 6). As a result, he could not bring in the textual sphere that he intended to. Therefore, it seems that these two utterances disclaimed his performance.

After these disclaimers of performance, Bart tried to step forward into performance frame by drawing on the textual sphere again. He indexed the textual sphere by saying *kono kiji ni yore ba* 'according to this article' (line 11). Then, he was able to state the fact in the article that *konbini de tsuuro wa ano totemo semai kara...* 'in the convenience store, the aisle is very narrow...' (lines 11 and 12), which also frames a following question about the meaning of *yuttari* (line 13). Therefore, this excerpt showed that Bart sometimes could display a competent performance by successfully drawing on the contextual sphere, but in other cases, he could not sustain this level of performance due to disclaimers of performance.

In sum, Bart showed competent performance in this presentation by trying hard to draw on the textual as well as the contextual sphere as much as possible. He sometimes failed to do so because of some disclaimers of performance such as *wasurechatta* ‘I forgot’, his use of situationally irrelevant expressions, the use of an informal form such as *wakaranai*, or his failure to frame questions.

Sam

Sam was a male graduate student who had studied Japanese for six years. He lived in Tokyo for four years where he was a dormitory leader of a *Gaijin house* (an apartment for foreigners). He knew about Japanese as well as Japan very well. He had learned Japanese both by going to a language school and by himself. However, according to him, he did not have much time to talk with native speakers of Japanese during his stay in Tokyo.

For his oral presentation, Sam chose an article about young employees in the Japanese company. The article dealt with how young employees in the Japanese company think about romantic relationships, marriage, and so on, within the company. During his twenty-five minute presentation, he drew on the textual sphere and the contextual sphere very well. He asked six questions but framed only once for the questions. He also sometimes failed to be situationally relevant concerning the content of questions. Consider the following excerpt (3):

Excerpt 3

- 1 S: kono kiji wa chotto muzukashii kedo omoshiroi to omoimasu. a= kore o
 2 yomu no ni wa nihon no kaisha de hataraitte iru shain no shanai seikatsu ga
 3 sukoshi wakaru yoo ni narimasu. iroiro na hanashi ga a= haitte atte wakai
 4 shain no jinsei kachikan o a= shakai no kachikan mo ar- arawaseraremasu.
 5 wakai shain no shanai renai kekkon setsu dootoku nado ni a= taishite no taido
 6 ga yoku ii arawaseraremasu. wakarimashita? iroiro na shitsumon o kata-
 7 <X katoete kita kara X>, shitsumon shimasu. a= kono kiji wa donna zasshi de
 8 notte iru to omoimasu ka?
 9 T: ii shitsumon desu ne.

English Translation

- 1 S: I think that this article is very interesting. Reading this article, you come to
 2 understand the company life of people a little bit. There are various stories in
 3 the article in which a sense of values concerning life as well as society is
 4 described. A young staff’s attitude toward a romance in a company, marriage,
 5 moral, and so on, is well described. Do you understand? <X (I) prepared
 6 X>, I will ask you various questions now. In what kind of magazine do you
 7 think this article appears?
 8 T: A good question.

In (3), Sam first stated his reactions about the article and then tried to ask a question. Here, Sam displayed a competent performance and seemed to assume responsibility for his presentation to the audience. His speech was formal, using *masu*, which indicates that he maintains situational relevance. He also drew on the textual sphere very well. For example, he said, *iroiro na hanashi ga a= haitte atte wakai shain no jinsei kachikan o a= shakai no kachikan mo ar- arawaseraremasu* ‘There are various stories in the article in which a sense of values concerning life as well as society is described’ (lines 3 and 4). Here, *arawaseraremasu* ‘is described’ (though his

conjugation is a little bit wrong; he should have said *arawasarareteimasu*) indexes the content of the article. Furthermore, he successfully made reference to the contextual sphere in his presentation by saying *kono kiji wa chotto muzukashii kedo omoshiroi to omoimasu* ‘I think that this article is very interesting’ (line 1). The verb *omoimasu* ‘I think’ indexes his reaction about the article.

Sam framed a question once in (3). The utterance *shitsumon shimasu* ‘I will ask you a question’ (line 7) framed the coming question. By this utterance, the audience could prepare for the coming question: *a= kono kiji wa donna zasshi de notte iru to omoimasu ka* ‘In what kind of magazine do you think this article appears?’ (lines 7 and 8).

The following excerpt (4) shows that Sam failed to bring a question in to the contextual sphere, which led to situational irrelevance.

Excerpt (4)

- 1 S: ... kono kiji no naiyoo ni tsuite amerika no kaisha
 2 to nihon no kaisha to onaji desu ka, chigau desu ka?
 3 T: amerika no kaisha ni tsutometa koto aru hito imasu ka? Minna
 4 gakuseeidakara shiranai n ja naika na.
 5 C: soo desu ne.
 6 S: demo amerika jin de sho=?
 7 X: @@@
 8 T: amerika jin demo kaisha ni tsutome nakucha waka n nai n ja nai desu ka ne.

English Translation

- 1 S: ... About the content of this article, is it the same in the Japanese company and
 2 in the American company? Or different?
 3 T: Is there anyone who worked for a company in the United States before? Since
 4 everyone is a student, I suspect that he/she knows about it.
 5 C: Right.
 6 S: Aren't you American?
 7 X: @@@
 8 T: Even if they are American, if they don't have any experience working, they
 9 may not know about it.

In (4), Sam is asking a question about differences between the American and the Japanese companies concerning a romance in the company. He asked the same question for two minutes, but none of the students tried to answer the question.

Here, though Sam used the formal verb form *desu* consistently, his performance in asking a question was not situationally relevant. Sam's question in line 2 seemed to ignore the situation in the classroom because the audience in the classroom did not have any experience in working for a company. This was evidenced by the fact that the teacher dismissed the question by saying *amerika jin demo kaisha ni tsutome nakucha waka n nai n ja nai desu ka ne* ‘Even if they are American, they may not know about it if they don't have an experience in working.’ (line 8). Note that Sam tried to justify his question by saying *demo amerika jin de sho=?* ‘Aren't you American?’ (line 6). Therefore, in (4), because of his inattention to the contextual sphere of the classroom, he failed to show a competent performance in terms of situational relevancy.

In summary, Sam demonstrated very competent performance in this presentation by trying hard to draw on the textual as well as the contextual spheres in the presentation, and the

fairly good maintenance of the formal verb forms *desu* and *masu*. However, he sometimes failed to give a competent performance partly because his questions were not situationally relevant and partly because he often could not frame questions.

Conclusions

In the present study, four concepts were utilized to describe the oral performances of three JFL learners in the classroom presentation: framing (Johnson, 1996), situational relevancy (Johnson, 1996), textual sphere (Johnson, 1994, 1996; Johnson & Evans, 1995), and contextual sphere (Johnson, 1994, 1996; Johnson & Evans, 1995). The analysis of the present study reveals that learners are successful in displaying competent performance drawing on textual and contextual spheres. However, the present study also shows that learners are not consistent in framing questions and some learners are not able to maintain situational relevancy, which indicates that they frequently stepped in and out of competent performance during their oral presentations in the Japanese class. Yet, the present study shows that during the oral presentations, the learners are willing to take a risk in trying hard to perform in Japanese over a topic that they choose, which I believe leads to further improvement of their Japanese proficiency levels.

The present study also shows that the four concepts I utilized would benefit both SL researchers and classroom instructors. SL researchers can understand how SL learners construct competent linguistic performances in the classrooms by looking at the ways to frame, to be situationally relevant, and to draw on the textual and contextual spheres. SL classroom instructors can guide the students toward competent classroom linguistic performances such as oral presentations by teaching expressions which index these concepts. The analyses of linguistic performances, based on these kinds of concepts, as Johnson suggests (Johnson 1996), would provide them with a rich picture of the language use of the SL learners, which I believe will contribute to the further development of the study of SL use.

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ⁱ Johnson considered many instances of written or oral production in the classroom as a kind of performance given for a particular audience (Johnson 1994, 1996; Johnson & Evans, 1995).

ⁱⁱ It is noted that the degree to which performer considers the textual and the contextual spheres depends on the types of tasks in the classroom (Johnson 1994, 1996; Johnson & Evans, 1995). For example, “in writing personal dialogue journal entries, learners might draw more heavily on and index the contextual sphere, while writing a summary of an historical event they might need to draw on the textual sphere” (Johnson 1994, p.191).

ⁱⁱⁱ The following symbols appear in my transcription: (1) [] --- speech overlap; (2) = --- lengthening; (3) ... --- long pause (.7 seconds or longer); (4) @ --- laughter; (5) <WH WH> --- whisper quality; (6) X --- indecipherable syllable; (7) <X X> --- uncertain hearing; (8) the period (.) --- falling intonation; and (9) the question mark (?) --- rising intonation.