A STUDY OF LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION: LEARNING AND MAKING SENSE IN A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

REBECA JASSO-AGUILAR

University of Hawai'i

This paper is about children’s second language socialization. It is about how a child, a Japanese eight year old boy, tries to make sense of his world in a second language classroom. A justification for the title and the content of this paper is my belief that language acquisition does not happen in isolation. The way in which children develop their skills and competence in a second language, and the way they display them, are greatly affected by their classrooms, peers, teachers, family, etc., as well as by their personalities (Wong-Fillmore, 1979). To have a more holistic understanding of the process of second language learning, therefore, it is not sufficient to observe learners producing utterances in isolation, but it is necessary to take into consideration the social context as well. The present study, a description of a child’s sociocultural development, is a complementary analysis to a linguistically oriented one. It is not intended to be better nor more complete, but rather, to address issues that are more commonly left untouched.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative researchers interested in language issues have offered an alternative to mainstream SLA studies in viewing acquisition not only as a mental individualistic process, but one that is also embedded in the sociocultural context in which it occurs. An interpretive qualitative study utilizes interviews, observations, and other forms of data collection within the time frame necessary for gaining an understanding of the actor’s meanings for social actions (an emic perspective). From this point of view, mental processes are not unimportant, but they are situated in a larger sociocultural context that are equally important (Davis, 1995).

This study focuses on the process of language socialization of a child acquiring English, and on the role that interactional routines and strategies play in successful second language learning, a topic on which research in applied linguistics renders contradictory results (Krashen & Scarcella, 1978; Bohn, 1986; Hakuta, 1974, Wagner-Gough & Hatch, 1975; Wong-Fillmore, 1979). It is important to note that interactional routines in the sociocultural literature are viewed differently from the way routines are viewed in the SLA literature. The SLA perspective is concerned with psycholinguistic processes and whether or not formulaic utterances and interactional routines enable learners to arrive at the rules via segmenting formulas and frames. From a sociocultural perspective, interactional
routines and the strategies used to enact them are part of a sociocultural perspective and system, and to understand the meaning of an enacted routine, one must examine its place in the system. Who can say what to whom, for what purpose and in what manner is shaped as much by the local system as it is by individual psycholinguistic processes (Willet, 1995).

From the perspective of language socialization through the micro-politics of social interaction, language learning is the process of becoming a member of a sociocultural group. Engagement in the socio-cultural practices of the new group provides newcomers with the opportunity to gradually appropriate the language and culture (“languaculture”) needed to be considered an insider (Willet, 1995).

The notion of language socialization draws on sociological, anthropological, and psychological approaches to the study of social and linguistic competence within a social group (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Children acquire social knowledge as they acquire knowledge of the language and culture (Bernstein, 1975, cited in Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986, p. 163-164). Bruner (1981) makes a similar claim, when he asserts that to acquire full membership in a group, one must learn not only the language of the group but how to get things done with words in that language. For Saville-Troike (1982), acquisition of communicative competence is the result of interaction within a sociocultural context, and not just the unfolding of innate, pre-programmed behavior.

In the process of socialization, language and culture are assumed to play critical roles in the organization of socialization contexts. The study of language acquisition has as an ultimate goal the understanding of what constitutes linguistic competence at different developmental points, while the ultimate goal of the study of language socialization is the understanding of how people become competent members of social groups. As Schieffelin and Ochs (1982) point out, both processes are integrated. The acquisition process is deeply affected by the process of becoming a competent member of society, and becoming a competent member is realized to a large extent through language, by acquiring knowledge of its functions, social distribution, and interpretations in and across socially defined situations (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1982).

Learning does not take place in isolation. The learning environment often includes other people which causes socialization and language learning to be closely intertwined (Erickson, 1982; Peters & Boggs, 1986). Socializing situations are fairly predictable as to time, place, participants, and desired outcomes, this predictability facilitates, to one degree or another, language learning. When children learn to participate in an event they learn cultural values and rules of behavior for that particular setting as well. Children learn to participate by first learning one part of a routine and then the entire routine, with subsequent new and more complex performances being expected, routines simultaneously provide a framework for input to the child’s developing linguistic systems (Peters & Boggs, 1986).
Willet (1995) relies on Peters and Boggs (1986) definition of interactional routines as sequences of exchange in which one speaker’s utterances, accompanied by appropriate nonverbal behavior, calls forth one of a limited set of responses by one or more participants. Routines can be identified as such by the ability of the researcher or members of the culture to predict the next line in an exchange: the more exact the prediction, the more formulaic the routine. It is important to identify routines as they exist at a given point in time because the changes that they undergo will constitute the evidence for language development, providing that their social significance in the community is understood. Willet defines interactional routines as predictable sequences of exchanges with a limited set of appropriate utterances, responses, and strategies, embedded in communicative events. Events are culturally defined and bounded segments of activity that constitute meaningful contexts for action, interpretation, and evaluation (Bauman, 1986, p. 3, cited by Willet, 1995, p. 5).

Willet points out that the kinds of interactional routines and strategies she identified were particular to the classroom in her study (Willet, 1995, p. 80). I interpret this as the notion that each particular classroom provides students with different communicative events and interactional routines which are unique and local to that setting. The classroom I observed presented events and routines different from the ones described by Willet; nevertheless, children managed, by creating and using their own strategies, to learn how to participate in these events and to become competent members of the classroom. This paper will show Sadao participating in such events, and how his participation changed over time, as his competence grew.

**METHODOLOGY**

The case study reported in this paper is based on weekly, one-hour observations of the participant in his ESL classroom. I participant-observed in the ESL classroom over a period of two months during the Fall, and just under two months during the Spring. Although my participation was not that of a teacher’s aide, I helped Tina, the teacher, in every way and every time she asked me to. Also, I was always free to talk to and interact with the children, as long as it did not disturb the class. The first minutes of my arrival were the ideal moment to do this because it was a transition period between the first and second hour of the daily two hour ESL class, a type of break when the children were not involved in any specific activity. I tape-recorded all these sessions except for the first two. I did not record those sessions because I felt that a period of time was needed to gain familiarity with the children and the teacher. I felt that the use of a tape recorder from the very first meeting, even if Tina had agreed, would have been too imposing. I also took field notes during the observations and interactions, which supplemented the audio tapes.
In addition, I visited my participant’s home several times during the Fall, accompanied by two co-researchers who were also doing their own study of two other children in the home. We would meet the children for periods of time that ranged from one to three hours. During that time, we would play games with them, usually card or board games, and we tape-recorded these sessions. The most common game of cards played was “Rich Man Poor Man,” while the most played board games were “Life” and “Go for it.” On three occasions we took the children out: twice to a bowling alley and on another occasion to play in the park. On one occasion, we visited one of my co-researcher’s apartment, which gave us the opportunity to play a different game “I see...” (a variation of “I spy” game). This opportunity arose from the fact that the children were curious about the different objects in the apartment, since it was the first time visiting there. This curiosity was not present in their own house, used as they were to being there all the time. These outings were difficult to tape-record. Since we never asked the children to carry a tape recorder with them, the audiotapes were not clear. Field notes, however, were taken, providing insight into the children’s socialization process in different settings. Sadao’s mother and his ESL teacher also provided valuable information which shed light on Sadao’s language socialization process.

The focus of this paper is largely on Sadao’s ESL classroom, on how his participation in the classroom changed over time as his competence grew. My interpretations will be based on what I considered to be evidence from the data collection mentioned above, which I admit from the very beginning, is not enough to consider this an ethnographic study. Nevertheless, I will try to present descriptive details that, together with the narrative, will attempt to give readers a sense of the sociocultural microcosmos of Sadao’s ESL classroom, and how he made sense of it during the different stages of his sociolinguistic development.

THE PARTICIPANT(S)

Sadao is one of three Japanese boys who arrived with their parents in Hawai‘i in August 1995. Masao, the oldest brother, is eleven years old, Sadao is eight, and Kenji is four. They are the children of an American woman and a Japanese man, and they were born and raised in Japan. Julie, the mother, is a college teacher of English, and the father, Kenichi, is a salesperson. Julie is a native speaker of English and highly proficient in German; after more than fifteen years in Japan she is now a bilingual speaker of English and Japanese, while Kenichi is a native speaker of Japanese with little English proficiency. The whole family came to Hawai‘i for Julie to attend graduate school at the local university. At the time of their arrival, the children were what could be considered monolingual speakers of Japanese. Back in their home country, all interactions and
socialization were in Japanese. They attended regular Japanese schools and, according to Julie, the only time they heard English, aside from occasional English movies or TV shows (with subtitles in Japanese) was when she spoke on the phone with her relatives, and the only time they practiced English was when they visited her relatives in California. After a couple of weeks visiting, they would be able to manage basic phrases like “please,” “thank you,” etc.

Masao and Kenji, despite the age difference, have similar types of personality; they are, in their mother’s words, “pretty laid back kids,” more on the quiet side. Sadao, according to Julie’s description, was the opposite, and these individual differences among the children were manifested from the beginning. In our first visits to their home, Sadao was the one more interested in interacting with us, even when his English was almost non-existent, while Masao would watch TV, read comic books, play with his cards, stay in his room, and in general choose not to interact with us for most of the time. In terms of language production, Sadao would say and try anything, no matter how new it was, or how wrong he said it, while Masao was always very cautious. I remember a comment made by one co-researcher after the first two or three weeks of observations: “Masao speaks a lot less than Sadao, but his language is usually accurate, while the opposite is true of Sadao.” This accuracy was related to aspects of morphology and phonology. For Sadao, however, not being able to produce a morphologically or phonologically correct word was never an impediment to trying to communicate with us. During the first two visits, Sadao “taught” me how to play a certain game with cards, using only a few English words, and spent the whole game telling me what cards to play: “dis ando dis OK,” “dis no,” “dis good,” “my turn,” “this is a thirteen.” These individual differences had different outcomes for both kids: It would take Masao longer to try a new language item, but he would get it nearly right from the beginning; it would take no time for Sadao to try new items, but he would make the same initial mistakes for a considerable time. In Julie’s words, “Sadao doesn’t really listen. He goes with the flow. If it works, it works, and if it doesn’t, it will eventually. I don’t think he really worries about it.”

**SADAO’S ESL CLASSROOM**

George Washington Elementary School, where Sadao attended third grade, is a mainstream school with a large population of ESL children, just like the great majority of schools in Hawai‘i. Washington Elementary works under a “pull out” system, in which ESL children are pulled out of the regular classroom to attend an ESL classroom. Initially, children attend ESL classes on a daily basis, for two hours, and this period decreases according to children’s improvement in English. Sadao’s teacher was a friendly woman named Tina who firmly believed in the efficiency of her methods and instruction for ESL
children. She had Sadao's group come in every day, from 8:00 to 10:00 a.m. This group was actually made up of two groups, advanced and beginners, all of them third graders. The two groups would have a class together, from 8:00 to 9:00 a.m., and then the advanced group would return to their mainstream classrooms, while the beginners remained in the ESL classroom for one more hour. During the first hour, the total number of students would be ten or eleven, depending on attendance, of which six were boys. Sadao was the only boy who did not belong to the advanced group. In the second hour, there would be six or seven children, depending on attendance and on the time of the year (some children would leave and new children would join the class).

When Sadao joined this group, he was the least English proficient child among the students in Tina's classroom. He received a lot of help from Hiroo, a Japanese boy in the advanced group. Sadao's dependence on him was reflected by how he sat by his side and asked for help, always in Japanese, a practice that was not discouraged by Tina. Hiroo was always ready to help, translating and providing answers to Sadao, and they were both partners in playing with Japanese comic cards while the class was going on, whenever they could get away with it. They often sat at the end of the table, and showed each other the cards, while Tina kept busy at the other end, explaining whatever was going on at that particular moment in the class. I believe Hiroo's presence in the class made a big difference for Sadao because he was the only person who could explain to Sadao what was going on. In fact Julie, Sadao's mother, commented on how Sadao was the first of her children who, after the first day of class, mentioned that he had made a friend in school. This friend turned out to be Hiroo. I was able to notice this friendship because I initially started doing two-hour long observations per week, and therefore I was able to observe the two groups together a couple of times. Although time constraints made me restrict my observation time from 9:00 to 10:00 a.m., which meant that I was no longer able to observe Sadao's and Hiroo's interaction during the whole first hour, I usually arrived a few minutes before the advanced group left, and I invariably found Sadao and Hiroo sitting together and talking to each other.

There were five children in the beginner group when I began my observations in the Fall. Jenny, a Filipina girl, Arthur, a Korean boy, Daniel, a Chinese-Vietnamese boy, Mina, a Vietnamese girl, and Sadao. Arthur and Daniel were the most advanced students in the beginner class, and for reasons I do not know, were not required to attend the first period; they would usually come in for the second period, a few minutes after the activities had begun. Jenny had already spent a year in the class and seemed to me just as advanced as Daniel and Arthur, although she was required to attend the ESL class for the two periods. Mina was a newcomer to the classroom like Sadao, but she had spent a few months in Hawai'i before she joined in the Fall and had attended Summer school. Although she was a beginner, she was more proficient than Sadao.
The composition of the classroom changed during the semester: Mina left after a few weeks, and Grace, a newly arrived Hungarian girl, joined the group about a month after Sadao, and although she had no English proficiency at the time of her arrival, she caught up with Sadao and passed him in less than a month; Hae-Young, a Korean girl with very limited English proficiency, joined the group in early December, although I did not meet her until the Spring. There were two new students in the Spring: Genaro and Willa, a boy and girl from the Philippines. Also, a teacher’s aide joined Tina’s classroom a few weeks into the Fall and took over the beginner class from 8:00 to 9:00 a.m. Although the two groups were still in the same classroom, they were separated by a row of short bookcases in a way that both classes could take place without disturbing one another; the students in one group were not even able to see the students in the other group. This was a positive change as far as instruction went: by virtue of being separated in two levels of linguistic proficiency, both groups could receive attention and instruction better tailored to their needs. But for Sadao this meant that he could not interact with Hiroo the way he used to; it also meant that for most of the Fall, during the first hour in the ESL classroom, he was the only boy in a group of girls who were more proficient in the target language than he was.

Inspired by Willet’s findings in her study of children’s language socialization, my observations were guided by the belief that each classroom must surely provide children with particular events which allow them, by virtue of participation, to acquire sociolinguistic competence and become competent members in the classroom. After a few weeks into the observation process, I decided to let three broad questions be my guide: (a) What is going on in the classroom? (b) How does Sadao make sense of it? (c) How does his participation change over time as his competence grows?

Tina, whom the children called Mrs. Vanderbilt, had the class structured around various events which were repeated to some degree. I was able to observe phonics bingo games, spelling quizzes, story re-telling, team activities, and cultural activities. This paper will show examples of Sadao’s participation in story re-telling, cultural activities, and team activities. I have chosen these events because they were the ones most often repeated during the course of my observations, and therefore the ones that best portray his change over time.

THE FALL SEMESTER: BEING THE NEW KID

I went into Sadao’s classroom expecting to see the child who had taught me how to play card games at his home, the child who was not afraid to try new language items. What I saw most of the Fall was a child that would sit at one extreme of the table, far from the teacher, and who would keep drawing comic characters while the class went on.
Sadao, who did not need any encouragement from his mother to interact (in English) with me or with my co-researchers at home, would not initiate any interactions on his own in the classroom and would interact with Tina only upon her request. He was not unfriendly to the other children, but rarely were the interactions initiated by him. He would spend long periods looking at his Japanese comic character cards or drawing them. When involved in individual work, like writing a story, or drawing, he would work mostly in silence, occasionally asking Tina “Japanese OK?” for example during spelling quizzes, or asking me or Tina “Spell?” when writing something. This quiet behavior would be in agreement with students’ behavior in Japanese classrooms, where quietness and diligence are highly praised (Hendry, 1986). However, it is important to point out that, when Hiroo was around, Sadao did not seem as quiet and diligent as when he was on his own; he would always consult with Hiroo, seek his help, and manage to play with him, even during individual work. Sadao’s quietness was a contrast with the other children’s behavior: Jenny and Grace as a rule where always sitting right next to Tina, asking her questions, or seeking her approval for something they were working on; Arthur and Daniel would continuously talk between themselves and to Tina as well, usually asking her questions. As Sadao became more familiar with the boys in the beginner class, he shared his drawings with them, gaining their admiration (Japanese children are, almost as a rule, excellent drawers) and their desire to draw the same comic characters. It was not uncommon to see Sadao and Arthur sitting together, Arthur trying to imitate Sadao’s drawings.

Sadao’s behavior, on the surface, was that of a student who was simply not interested in the class, and in fact, Tina labeled him as a smart kid who didn’t pay attention, a kid who didn’t listen. Not only did he rarely pay attention during Tina’s instruction, but he would get ready to leave the classroom without finishing whatever work he was doing as soon as the bell rang. During class, he would often go to the back of the classroom, where supplies such as construction paper, markers, etc. where kept, to look for something, and he would remain there, sometimes causing Arthur or Daniel to do the same, until Tina called him and asked him to come back to the table. At his home, I would ask him, “How was Tina’s class,” and he would shrug his shoulders and not answer my question.

Story Re-Telling was a speech event which occurred approximately once a week. It was an event in which children had the opportunity to demonstrate their competence not only in memorization skills, or subject content, but also, and just as important, in their knowledge of the classroom rules. A very important rule that Tina explicitly encouraged was to raise one’s hand when bidding for the floor. “Raise your hand if you know the answer,” “Don’t shout,” and “I will not ask children who are shouting” were phrases of advise that Tina usually gave at the beginning of this (and almost any other) activity. Usually the activity would start out in a very quiet, orderly manner. Tina would sit on a chair, holding up an open book in her hands. The children would sit on the floor in front of
A STUDY OF LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION

her, in a semicircle, and Tina would rotate the book slowly, from right to left and opposite, so that all the children could see it. This activity was a follow-up to Story Reading, in which a new story was read to the children. During Story Re-telling, Tina would let the children look at the pictures and ask them to describe the pictures and to re-tell the story. Usually she would start out with questions like “tell me, what do you see?”, “what can you see in the picture?”, “what do you know about _____?”, and would keep looking at the children faces; the children would raise their hands (when they knew the answer) and wait for Tina to say their names. If children answered correctly, they would get a point, a “dollar,” which they would write down on a sheet of paper which resembled a balance sheet (this way to keep their scores was a way to reinforce simple math like adding and subtracting). Tina tried to make the questioning process fair for all the children: she would not ask the same child twice before she had asked the rest of the children, making sure that the least proficient had had a turn, even if other children were raising their hands. Her waiting time was longer with the least proficient children, and she would repeat the same question in different ways, something she did not do with the more advanced kids.

The beginning of this activity was, thus, very orderly. This would change, however, as the activity progressed, a pattern that was observed in all the other activities. As the activity went on, the more advanced children would bid for the floor in a very vocal manner: “Mrs Vanderbilt, Mrs Vanderbilt, my turn!”, “I know, Mrs Vanderbilt, I know!”, “My turn, Mrs Vanderbilt, my turn!”, and “My turn Mrs Vanderbilt... Mrs Vanderbilt!” were expressions which the children used to get Tina’s attention, many times making it difficult for her to realize who was the child first bidding for the floor. Under these circumstances, it was also difficult to keep track of how many times each child had had a turn and answered correctly, so the process became less fair than it was at the beginning. Quite often she would reprimand or quiet down rowdy children in the middle of some other child’s turn. In this activity, as well as in the others, the more advanced children were the ones who finished with the most points. Children who had a better command of the language, but who had also already learned the classroom rules, were usually the big winners. Although competitive games and activities are not uncommon in Japanese classrooms, they are usually conducted in an orderly manner, and rowdiness is discouraged by the teachers. Children are allowed to raise their hands and wait for turns, but vocally competing for the floor is not common practice (based on personal communication with Japanese teachers and personal experience teaching Japanese children). Thus, it must have been confusing for Sadao to function in this new classroom where one rule was allowed and verbally encouraged while the opposite was verbally discouraged but still allowed. Indeed, it took him some time to realize this, and it took a higher level of English proficiency to fully take advantage of it.
Another highly repeated event was cultural activities. Tina believed that children in the ESL classroom would benefit from learning not only the language, but the new culture as well, in context. For her, holidays celebrated in the US were a good vehicle for providing this context. During the course of the Fall (and later on in the Spring), she organized activities for holidays such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Tina would read stories on the topic, or the children would read by themselves. They would write a little story or make a card, and then she would usually have a group activity in which new vocabulary was introduced.

I believe that, despite cultural differences, Sadao started learning the classroom rules by participating in these events. He learned that he had to raise his hand to bid for the floor, but that bidding was not enough. He learned that he needed to have the answer ready before raising his hand, and he also learned that, while quietness and order were appreciated and encouraged at the beginning, it was active bidding and competition that provided more points. By participating, by trying out the spoken rules (“raise your hand if you want to answer,” “don’t shout,” and “wait for your turn”), Sadao found out that there were unspoken rules which were even more valid than the explicit ones. His changing participation in these events throughout the period of observations shows how his competence progressed.

The following is an excerpt of the first time I observed Story Re-telling.

Example 1: Sept. 20, 1995
Tina: So... tell me... what can you see... what do you see in the picture.
Jenny: Tubby!
Tina: Yes... Tubby. You get a point Jenny. What else... what else can you see?... Mina
Mina: Elephant!
Tina: Ok, an elephant... and what do you know about this elephant?
Daniel: His name is Tubby.
Tina: Right, his name is Tubby... what else do you know about Tubby?
Sadao: Tubby is pet.
Tina: Very good, Tubby is a pet... a pet elephant. What else do you remember about Tubby?
Arthur: He goes up in the sky!
Tina: No no, not yet... later. What else do you remember about Tubby now?
Sadao: Tubby is small elephant.
Tina: Yes, Tubby is a small elephant. What else?
Mina: The boy is pet.
Tina: Well... yes, Tubby is the boy’s pet.
Each time a child has been acknowledged as having had a correct answer they write a point on their balance sheet. One difference here is that the girls always wait for Tina to say that they get a point, while the boys write it whether she says it or not, as long as correctness has been acknowledged (“very good,” “yes”). The event goes on for a few more turns before the children gradually start a more active bid for the floor: children literally keep their hands up all the time while shouting. Sadao imitates this, and he also gets the floor. But he has not yet learned the unspoken rule that one must know the answer in advance, he remains silent, tilting his head to the side while he appears to be searching for the answer, and he does not get as many points as the rest of the students.

The following excerpt is from another Story Re-telling event which took place a few weeks later. This time, Sadao raises his hand and quietly asks for his turn.

*Example 2: Nov. 8*

Tina: First of all... I’ll show you the pages again... And then you have to remember... the action, what they’re doing, you know... the action word... like... what?... they jump... like... go... like... walk. Remember this?... words... So first of all we don’t read that... first of all we find things. OK, you have to... Sadao please what do find, what do you remember in this story. A thing... a person...

Sadao: Ah! (he overlaps with Tina, raising his hand and gesturing in a way that indicates he’s ready to answer).

Tina: ... and animal... or

Sadao: Princess!

Tina: Princess... does it have a princess in there?

Sadao: Yeah.

Tina: Yes. Where is the princess Sadao... Sadao, you said princess, where does it belong?... To things?... To people?... or to animals?/

Sadao: /People/ (overlapping).

Tina: Good, that’s good. That’s good (She turns to another child and at that very moment Sadao remembers somethings that he feels he should have said during his turn).

Sadao: Ah...! King too... King.

Sadao’s last interaction shows that he is also learning that being noisy sometimes helps in getting, or holding, the floor. He does not succeed in getting his turn back to add the last piece of information (King), but he realizes that the class is still in its early stages, when order and quietness prevail more than active and noisy bids for turns, so he waits for his next turn patiently. After Tina has given everybody a turn, Sadao raises his hand and quietly bids for the floor, with the expected response on Tina’s part.
Example 3: Nov. 8
Sadao: My turn.
Tina: Sadao, yes.
Sadao: Bert... belt?... the bell? (he hesitates with the pronunciation)
Tina: Ah::::! that’s the most important thing you remember. Very good! Belt! That’s the most important thing...

Becoming competent participants in these events was not as cut and dried as simply learning the rules and applying them. Although these events provided the children with fairly predictable linguistic and behavioral routines, Tina’s management of the class sometimes could be a challenge for the children; sometimes predicting the expected response, or even having the correct answer, did not exactly work. In the following example, Tina is eliciting and teaching vocabulary during a cultural activity related to Halloween. The activity is pumpkin carving. Tina is standing at one end of the table, and the children are sitting at both sides. Sadao is sitting a little farther behind because he is in charge of drawing the face of the pumpkin. Tina has the tools needed for the carving, and she is showing them to the children, holding them up front and trying to elicit their names, looking around at the children’s faces until someone provided the correct answer.

Example 4: Oct. 27
Tina: What do we need? (holding up a carving knife)
Jenny: Knife!
Tina: Carving knife, it’s a carving knife (she puts it aside and holds up a spoon). What else do we need?
Daniel: Spoon!
Tina: Spoon, right. What else do we need (holding up a box of matches).
Sadao: Match. (No acknowledgment, Tina keeps looking around).
Daniel: Candle!
Sadao: Match.
Arthur: Fire.
Jenny: Candle.
Tina: No, it’s not a candle. It’s (looking around to all the children)...matches!

Sadao looks at her and at the rest of the children with a puzzled look on his face and then returns to his work drawing the pumpkin’s face. As the activity evolves and Tina continues eliciting vocabulary, Sadao does not bid for the floor again; all his attention is focused on the pumpkin. Children are required to write down in their notebooks the words
written on the board. When the bell rings, Sadao starts putting his things away, getting ready to leave. I notice that he has not written anything, and I say “Sadao, you haven’t written the words on the board;” he looks at me and shrugs his shoulders, “I don’t have a pen” he says in Japanese and leaves.

In the next example another child, Arthur, receives no feedback on the adequacy or inadequacy of a particular question:

Example 5: Nov. 8
Tina: OK... All right... now... knowing this... knowing these words... are you able to write a story now... I think so, right? Because you got the giant, you got the tailor, the king, the princess, the god...
Arthur: /But can we make it different?
Tina: ... the tree, the rock, the cheese, the birds/child overlaps again/the corn...
Arthur: /Can we make it different?
Tina: ... all these things, and the belt, and the fight, right?/child overlaps again/all right?
Arthur: /But can we make it different, the story?
Tina: ... now, let’s find the... doing words... the action words.

Arthur gives up trying to get an answer to his question. Later on, when children come up with their stories, it becomes clear that there was indeed some room for creativity. But with Arthur’s question going unanswered at that specific moment, particular information about classroom activities is learned by trial and error.

Bloome and Bailey (1992) have pointed out that people construct events by acting and reacting to one another and holding one another accountable for acting within the evolving interpretative framework of the event.

An individual can intend an utterance to mean or do something, but the ways in which others respond to that utterance may redefine it and de facto give the utterance meaning. Thus, the meaning or significance of any utterance is not located solely in a person’s intent but rather in the event, in the concerted actions of people with each other. (Bloome & Bailey, 1992 p. 187, cited in Willet, 1995, p. 5)

This was specially true for the particular context of this classroom. The ESL children, especially the least proficient ones, like Sadao, would make meaning in a certain way for a particular situation, and react accordingly.

In the following example, the theme of the class is Thanksgiving, and the event is a cultural activity in which the children will write Thanksgiving cards. In preparation for this activity, the children’s weekly story reading had been about the pilgrims, and Tina keeps referring them to the story in her efforts to elicit from them a reason to send somebody a Thanksgiving card; Indians, Pilgrims, turkey, family, Mom and Dad, Thanksgiving, and
other words are at some point central themes in the elicitation effort. The children have
spent the first part of the lesson making their cards, and the table is covered with
construction paper, crayons, and markers. At this particular time, the children are bidding
for the floor and overlapping, instead of waiting for their turns. Sadao, who drew a turkey
and glued it on yellow construction paper, is not taking part in the bidding; he is
drumming with his pencil and making sounds (“chun-chun”) to go with the drumming, his
eyes sometimes going from his card to other kids’ cards and to Tina.

Example 6: Nov. 17
Tina: Look look look! ... last page...
Arthur: Look look look! (imitating Tina)
Tina: (Reads) “The pilgrims did not forget to give thanks on the first Thanksgiving, they
thank god for all that was given to them, a good food... good friends... and a good
life... So, what does it mean to you... you thank... so, in your family...
Jenny: Happy thanks for god!
Tina: But in your family you thank...
Daniel: /Family/
Jenny: Mother and father and the god.
Tina: In your family you thank Mom and Dad?... /For what?...
Arthur: /Thank you Momie/ (in a babysish voice)
Tina: What do we have to thank Mom and Dad for, who can tell me...
Grace: Because... we want to (children laugh)
Tina: What did Mom do that you should be very thankful.
Grace: She bought us toys.
Tina: OK... buy toys (she writes it on the board). What else... what did Moms do?
Arthur: She makes food.
Jenny: She cleans our rooms.
Tina: Mom cooks, yeah, alright (writes it on the board). Daniel, your turn, Jenny, you get
a point.
Arthur: I got a point too!
Tina: Yes, so what do Moms do. She cleans (writes it on the board).
Jenny: She works.
Tina: Right, Mom works, right? Mom works (on the board).
Arthur: Mom works to make money.
Tina: Yes, she works to make money. What else... what else you’re thankful... you thank
Mom for... what else Mom doing... cooks, works, cleans house... what else... is
that all? (At this point, Sadao is looking attentively at the board, where words
“Mom: cooks, works, cleans house” are written)
Daniel: Wash dishes.
Sadao: Japanese teacher.
Tina: (To Sadao) That means Mom works? Mom works teaching?
Sadao: Yeah.
Tina: She works teaching to earn money, to use that money to buy...
Chorus: Food... toys (Tina writes these on the board).
Tina: OK now, how about Dad. OK OK. You thank your Dad for... OK Sadao? (Sadao is raising his hand).
Sadao: Sleeping. (All the children, and Tina, laugh. Sadao does not laugh, he keeps looking at Tina with the same serious expression he had when he answered).
Tina: For sleeping? (she is still laughing) You thank your Dad for sleeping/.../all the time? You thank your Dad for...
Sadao: Yeah?
Tina: OK, tell me about your Dad.
Jenny: Working.
Tina: Sure, Dad does work. What else does Dad do?
Grace: Let us watch TV.
Sadao: Cleaning.
Tina: OK, Dad cleans the house too?//
Sadao: Yeah.
Tina: Your Dad cleans the house? Wow!
Sadao: Momie is a school.
Tina: Oh... Momie’s working so Dad has to take care of the house.

What this excerpt shows is that Sadao makes a particular interpretation of an intended question, and responds accordingly. In his interpretation, he has given a de facto meaning to the question, and his response is correct within the context of this meaning (“Japanese teacher” is a correct answer to “what does your mother do?” although not to “what do you thank your mother for?”; “Sleeping” is a correct answer to “What does your Dad do?”, although not to “What do you thank your Dad for?”). Within these contexts for the same situation, both children’s laughter and Sadao’s seriousness are understandable and appropriate behaviors and responses. Nevertheless, this can be a source of confusion for newcomers in their struggle to make sense in the new language. Another important aspect of Sadao’s behavior is shown in this example: his level of attention to the class increases with linguistic and cognitive simplification of the event; his response to the first part, when multiple topics in the dialogue made it difficult to understand, was lack of interest, once the number of topics was reduced and visual aids simplified the input to a level he could handle, he became willing to participate. This attitude seems to be related to the concept
of "reasonable challenge" (Prabhu, 1987), which implies that tasks should be challenging but not overwhelming. Prabhu suggests that learners' perceptions play a role here: if a task looks so difficult that they feel sure they will fail in it, they are likely to be reluctant to make an effort at all. It seems that Sadao perceives the level of difficulty at the beginning of these interactions as being so high that no amount of effort and attention would help him understand, and therefore, his reluctance to make an effort is manifested as total lack of interest.

SPRING SEMESTER: THE NEW KID NO MORE

I returned to Sadao's ESL classroom in late January, after about eight weeks since the last observation. Although this may not seem like a long period of time, in early stages of child language development, it can indeed be long enough for them to make progress by leaps and bounds. When I called Tina to let her know that I would continue my observations, she very proudly announced to me that Sadao had "blossomed," referring to his language ability and classroom performance.

During the first observation, I am welcomed by the group of beginners, who are on a break. Because Tina has not finished class with the advanced group, the beginners are still on the other side of the room amusing themselves in various ways. Jenny, Grace, and Sadao are throwing paper balls and light objects at each other, and the first thing I hear from Sadao is "That hurt, you dummy!" said to Grace in response to her throwing an eraser at him. I am amazed at three things: the number of interactions initiated by Sadao, the fact that all these interactions are in English, and the fact that these interactions are with girls. I notice two new faces, Genaro and Willa, who are sitting together, drawing; they often gaze and smile at the three advanced children, who are being rowdy, and talk between themselves in their own language. Hae-Young is sitting by herself, drawing very quietly, although she also sometimes looks at the other children and smiles.

During the first observation day in the Spring, I notice a change in Sadao's behavior. During the cultural activity, making paper baskets for Valentine's Day, he sits next to Tina, and just like Jenny, Grace, Daniel, and Arthur, he constantly seeks confirmation and approval for his work "Like this Mrs Vanderbilt?"; he asks Tina for help "Ah... Mrs Vanderbilt" or "Mrs Vanderbilt... I need help"; he asks friends for help "Show me!"; and he follows Tina's instructions carefully and lets her know that he is paying attention.

Example 6: Feb. 8
Tina: OK... the bottom number two...
Sadao: I'm bottom number two.
This change of behavior, compared to the Fall semester, makes him “visible” to Tina, in a way that fulfills her expectations of a “good” student being one who “pays attention”.

Sadao even “teases” Tina about her use of Japanese language. In a particularly frustrating moment when Tina cannot find the correct way to weave her basket (that she is modeling for the children), the following interaction went on:

Example 7: Feb. 8
Tina: Wait wait wait... Oh, the teacher is failing here, the teacher is failing here...
OK... one moment one moment... un poquito un momentito (this means “one moment” in Spanish, she laughs) OK chotto matte... Japanese chotto matte (this means “wait a little” in Japanese).
Sadao: I don’t know that means.

Sadao has not only improved his linguistic proficiency; his socio-pragmatic competence has improved as well, and this is evidenced by his ability to carry on a conversation and to make jokes involving other children. In the following example, Sadao has finished individual reading, which Tina asked me to monitor. He finishes the story he was asked to read and makes no attempt to read another; instead he begins to draw, and I decide to try to “chat” with him.

Example 8: Feb. 22
Rebeca: Sadao are you happy to go back to Japan?
Sadao: No.
Rebeca: No?
Sadao: Because... Japan is too hard!
Rebeca: Japan is too hard? Or Japanese?
Sadao: Japan.
Rebeca: Japan is too hard? Oh... for example?
Sadao: Because... a... kanji and... math.
Rebeca: Oh... is it too hard?
Sadao: Aha.
Rebeca: Here is easy?
Sadao: Aha.
Rebeca: How about reading in English? Easy?
Sadao: Hard.
Rebeca: Which is harder, reading English or reading kanji? Which one is more difficult?
Sadao: Kanji.
Rebeca: Kanji... but you can write, you can write some kanji, right? For example, your name... can you write your name in kanji? (Sadao writes his name and explains the reading of each character).
Rebeca: Do you like your other classes?
Sadao: Yes.
Rebeca: Do you like Math?
Sadao: Yes.
Rebeca: Is Masayoshi still in this class? (I have meant to say Hiroo, but get confused with a Japanese boy in Masao’s classroom).
Sadao: No... Masa is... not this class, my brother’s class.
Rebeca: Oh... at 9:00 here? (I get distracted by Daniel’s arrival)
Sadao: No, not here.
Rebeca: Hi Arthur (throughout the observations I kept getting Daniel’s and Arthur’s names mixed up, Daniel and Sadao burst out laughing, and I notice my mistake). Oh, you’re Daniel... sorry.
Sadao: (Still laughing) Hi Julie (to me, calling me his mother’s name). Hi Arthur (to Daniel). Hi Grace (to Jenny, who is approaching us; the children around join in and start calling each other by different names).
Rebeca: And you (to Sadao), who are you?
Jenny: You are Mrs. Vanderbilt (to Sadao).

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has presented a documentation of a child’s language socialization, choosing his ESL classroom as the setting, and highly repeated events to show changes in his participation as his competence grew. It is important to cite Willet (1995) again here to emphasize the fact that classroom events and routines are local and particular to the specific setting, and that the ways children chose to participate in these events are affected by environmental factors like gender, composition of the class in terms of gender and proficiency levels, perception of the teacher’s expectations, as well as cultural and individual differences. Thus, for example, Sadao’s quietness at the beginning of the Fall semester was not only due to cultural differences, but also to his low proficiency in the target language, which made it difficult to immediately relate to other students. It is important to notice here that the new boy, Genaro, was behaving in a similar manner. Also important is the observation that the new girls did not remain as quiet as the boys for a long period of time, and I believe this was because the older girls always tried to make the new girls be part of the group from the very beginning. For example, when Grace joined the group, Jenny immediately tried to incorporate her into the classroom activities and...
helped her, not necessarily at Tina’s request. Similarly, when Hae-Young and Willa joined the class, Jenny and Grace would voluntarily team up with them and help them. The boys would help the newcomers as well, although it was mostly at Tina’s request, and although they played a teacher’s role in such situations, they did not seem to do it as “seriously” as the girls.

Sadao changed in behavior, from being quite uninterested in the class during the Fall to being interested and actively participating in the Spring, in what otherwise was an unchanging classroom. I believe that in the Fall, Sadao perceived the language in the ESL class as being so difficult that no amount of attention would help him understand what was going on, and therefore he chose to not pay attention, and instead, to amuse himself in his own way to avoid being bored. By the Spring, however, he had learned the classroom rules, both spoken and unspoken, and his language ability had improved to the point where paying attention made a big difference between enjoying the class and being totally bored. Part of having fun in the class was to be able to bid for the floor in as rowdy a way as the other students, to score as many points as them, and to score more points than the girls; Sadao could do this as long as he followed instructions, listened to what Tina said, and became actively involved in the events. And he chose to do so.

Questions about the outcome of Sadao’s socialization in different circumstances remain. For example, would Sadao’s proficiency have improved faster in the Fall had he not been the boy with the lowest proficiency? Would he have improved as much as he did in the Spring had there not been any new students to whom he could now give help? What would the outcome have been had he been an immigrant child, as opposed to the child of a visiting student soon returning to his home country? This study has addressed issues that are commonly left untouched in SLA research and shown the need to view language acquisition in the context in which it takes place.
REFERENCES


