A naturalistic stimulated recall study of specific silence events

7.1 Introduction

Stimulated recall is a form of introspective inquiry that has been employed extensively in educational research, primarily as a means of investigating individuals' concurrent thinking during specific past events (e.g. Butefish, 1990; Calderhead, 1981; Fox-Turnbull, 2009; O'Brien, 1993; Peterson & Clark, 1978). This is achieved by encouraging subjects to comment in a subsequent interview on what was happening at the time an event occurred, using prompts or stimuli connected to the incident as support. As Gass and Mackey (2000) have illustrated in their extensive overview of the approach, this method of data collection has recently been gaining increasing prominence within the field of second language education. While much of this previous research has focused on teachers' decision-making (e.g. Johnson, 1992; Nunan, 1991; Woods, 1989), stimulated recall has also been employed effectively in studies focusing on a variety of language learning topics, including for example, vocabulary acquisition (e.g. Paribakht & Wesche, 1999), written composition (e.g. Bosher, 1998), and interlanguage pragmatics (e.g. Robinson, 1992). More relevant to my own investigation into Japanese language learner silence are those studies which concentrate on oral interaction, and I shall now consider a number of these investigations in more depth.

It is no exaggeration to say that studies using stimulated recall which have silence at the heart of their focus are few and far between in the literature. One rare example is Nakane’s (2007) investigation into silence in intercultural communication. Employing a mixed methods research approach that included a retrospective interview component, Nakane’s conversation analysis-based study included three case studies.
of Japanese sojourners studying on mainstream university courses in Australia. After ethnographic observations of the three learners’ classroom turn-taking performances, Nakane made use of video-supported stimulated recall interviews to explore how the learners themselves, their co-learners and lecturers perceived the Japanese students’ silent behaviour. Although lacking detailed discussion on the procedural aspects of the recalls she carried out, Nakane’s findings are nevertheless strongly triangulated by the multiple data sources from which she collected her evidence. One key finding, in what was a wide-ranging study, was that silence poses significant problems for Japanese students studying abroad in English-speaking countries, particularly as there appears to be a mismatch in how silence is used and perceived by participants within intercultural classroom contexts.

Another quite different study investigating Japanese learners’ L2 oral interactions can be seen in Sato (2007). He employed a stimulated recall methodology to examine how eight first year university students modified their oral output differently depending on whether they were interacting with a peer or one of four native speakers (NS) of English. This quasi-experimental study found that self-initiated modified output was greater in learner-learner dyads when compared to learner-NS dyads. In addition, learner participants tended to feign understanding (see also Ellis, Tanaka & Yamazaki, 1994) and engaged in less negotiation of meaning when speaking to non-Japanese partners. Sato also explored the connection between social relationships and interactional moves by examining learners’ perceptions of their interlocutors and the effect this had on the number of repetitions they produced. Interestingly, some of Sato’s retrospective data suggest that repetitions were significantly higher amongst learner-NS dyads partly because learners wanted to show verbally that they were listening to their partner’s talk and thought that to have remained silent might have appeared excessively rude.

Mackey has been involved in a number of retrospective studies focusing on language learners’ oral interactions (e.g. Mackey, Gass & McDonough, 2000; Mackey, 2006). Building upon the notion that interaction facilitates second language acquisition, Mackey’s (2002) study used a stimulated recall methodology to examine 46 language learners’ perceptions of conversational interactions taking place in classroom and dyadic settings. Supported by a detailed description of research procedures, the investigation discovered a significant overlap between learners’ insights and researchers’ previous claims (e.g. Gass, 1997) about the benefits of L2 conversational interaction. For example,