Articles

Social Networking Approach (SNA) for Learning Language and Culture: Connecting Classrooms and the World

Sachie Banks[1]

Abstract

This study outlined differences between traditional language-teaching methods and the Social Networking Approach (SNA) (Tohsaku, 2013). SNA is a teaching framework of language and culture. It encourages students to form connections with people and society, through which they improve communication skills and cultural awareness in real-life situations. SNA also suggests that students should engage in collaborative tasks that stimulate their problem-solving skills, autonomy, and life-long learning. The study argued that shifting the goals, styles, and places of language teaching would be necessary in order to raise learners who can actively participate in a globalized society. SNA will play a pivotal role in such a transition of language teaching and contribute to the formation of ties between people and society.

1. Introduction

Despite drastic changes in the long history of foreign / second language education, its ultimate objective had remained the same: Students became functional in another language. The classroom was a place to teach and practice language in order to achieve this goal. One of the most popular teaching methods before and during the 1970s was the grammar-translation method. Understanding grammar and making perfect translations were the main focus, while oral proficiency received little attention (Omaggio Hadley 2001). The teaching style was often teacher-centered where teachers explained the grammar and students listened to the lectures.

Another popular method was the audio-lingual method. The goal was to prepare students to be able to communicate like native speakers. The main practices were

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[1] Department of Media and Communications Bunkyo University

memorization, repetition and pattern drills (Omaggio Hadley 2001). It was also a teacher-centered style of teaching, in which teachers demonstrated the correct form of using the language and students imitated them. Pronunciations and intonations were monitored and corrected by teachers and there was little flexibility about what or how students spoke. The audio-lingual method was influenced by the times that expected human beings to produce the same outcomes according to rules (Tohsaku 2017).

With the influence of globalization, the importance of cultural awareness and communicative competence were recognized in the field of language education. Translating, memorizing and repeating were not enough for learners to be ready to function successfully in another culture. The grammar translation method and audio-lingual method were criticized for their inflexibility and ineffectiveness in real-life. Learners were supposed to be able to communicate according to culturally specific context and achieve tasks using the language. The communicative approach became widely popular with the surge of such recognition.

There are three major characteristics of communicative language teaching. First, students should participate in communicative activities that reinforce understanding of the language. Students learn the new language system best by struggling to figure out how to express themselves and negotiating meanings through interactions with others (Omaggio Hadley 2001). Second, students work toward authentic tasks (Omaggio Hadley

2001). Tasks are designed based on students' levels of fluency and interests. An easy one can be asking a price in the context of shopping, while an advanced task may be solving an issue that occurred between a student and a professor when submitting an assignment. Third, students have to engage with meaningful and authentic language use (Omaggio Hadley 2001). Simple repetitions and oral drills that did not contain meaning and authenticity were discouraged in the communicative teaching. The form of teaching shifted from teacher-centered to student-centered. According to Cameron (2000), the importance of talking in the process of understanding the subjects was first recognized in UK higher education and quickly became the standard of many approaches around the world. Students' voice, identity and self-expressions also became core topics to consider in the field of foreign language teaching.

The important aspect of communicative teaching is setting up a context where communication takes place. Teachers are responsible for creating an authentic, meaningful situation in which students have to communicate in another language in order to complete a task or meet their needs (Lee & VanPatten 2003, Omaggio Hadley 2001). Instead of letting students in pairs say *Ikura desuka* (How much is it?)" "*Nihyaku en desu* (It's 200 yen)," as a drill teachers can create a situation. Students might be at a flea market in Japan to look for the Mother's Day gift, where prices are not clearly presented. They need to ask a price in Japanese in order to complete a task of shopping. In so doing, students are

able to use Japanese with a purpose in an authentic context, where they can learn cultural milleu and how to behave in particular situations.

While the communicative approach seemed ideal for improving oral fluency, Tohsaku (2013) pointed out that imagined context in classroom is never the same as real life. For example, role playing is often employed for communicative practice. In a shopping context a student plays a role as a customer and asks a price, while another student plays the role of a shop owner and gives an answer. If they play their own roles properly, they can complete their task without any problems. In real life situations, however, every single act does not always occur so smoothly. The owner may have a strong accent, which students are not familiar with. He may say "How much do you want?" "If it were 1,000 yen, would you buy it?" or "I recommend this, too. If you buy both of these, I will give you a discount." Even though students are engaged in a lot of communicative practices in class, the design of the communication is patterned and modified to some extent, which is fundamentally different from communication in real-life (Tohsaku 2013).

Communicative teaching was influenced by an era that sought people who could function according to social and cultural systems (Tohsaku 2017). Fluency built upon patterned practice and role playing, however, will not be enough to live, work and collaborate with others in the complexly globalized society of the 21st century (Tohsaku 2013). Being functional in another language is not sufficient for the current era, where people are expected to form ties with others from different backgrounds and collaborate with them in order to solve global-scale issues. Language teaching should modify its objectives according to the demands of the era. This is how SNA was created as a human development model of language teaching for the 21st century (Tohsaku 2012, 2013, 2017).

2. Key concept of SNA

SNA was developed by Tohsaku (2012, 2013, 2017) based on the *Gaikokugo Gakushuu no Meyasu* (Framework of Foreign Language Learning) (The Japan Forum 2012). It is a human development model of teaching, which aims to develop students' three skills: *Wakaru* (understanding), *Dekiru* (can do) and *Tsunagaru* (connecting) in the three fields: Language, culture and global society. It also encourages learners to connect with three related fields: Learners' interests, attitudes, and styles of learning; learners' previous knowledge, experience, other subjects; and people, objects, and information outside classrooms (Tohsaku 2013). whole picture is presented as "3 x 3 + 3." The key concept of SNA is described in Table 1.

SNA is based on the social constructivism (Vygotsky 1978) that contends that meanings and learning are built through the interaction with others. It is also rooted in the sociocultural theory in second language acquisition (Lantolf & Poehner 2008). Young (2008) considered communication skills as being able to participate in interactions and collaboration with others (Tohsaku 2017). SNA aims to

develop synthetic communication skills that are required to connect with people and society beyond classrooms.

Traditional teaching solely focused on understanding language and being able to accomplish tasks in another culture. The main learning takes place inside the classroom where teachers teach language and students practice communication in a specific context. What is new in SNA is that it considers "connecting with people" as one of the main objective skills that learners need to acquire. SNA also expanded the field of learning to the "global society" in which students participate beyond the classroom (Tohsaku 2017). SNA suggests that learning should take place in real-life, not in the real-life-like situations created by teachers in the classroom (Tohsaku 2013).

In traditional teaching, students learn language and culture in classroom first, in order to be ready to participate in real-life. SNA maintains that students should participate in real-life from the beginning. They may not be functional due to a lack of understanding of grammar and vocabulary or communicative competence. What is important is that students learn how to use language in the interaction with others (Tohsaku 2013). They can also learn cultural and, global matters through participating in real-life situations, where they meet people who are from various backgrounds.

3. SNA for teaching in the 21st century

Language teaching has been always influenced by the needs of an era (Tohsaku

Table 1. Key concept of SNA
(Tohsaku 2017, p. 5. Translated in English by author)

Skills \ Fields	Language	Culture	Global Society
Wakaru (Understanding)	Understand Grammar and vocabulary	Understand cultural matters	Understand characteristics and problems of global society
Dekiru (Can do)	Can use the language	Can use cultural knowledge	Can use global skills necessary for the 21st century
Tsunagaru (Connecting)	Connect with others using the language	Connect with various cultures	Contribute the global society through connecting with people

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Learner's interests, willingness, attitudes, and learning styles
Learners' previous knowledge, experience, and other subjects
People, objects, and information outside classroom

2017). What is expected and required in the 21st century are the skills to collaborate with people who have different value sets and work on complex issues that do not have just one answer. There are an increasing number of global-scale problems around the world, such as immigration issues, religious conflicts, global warming issues, and national security issues (Tohsaku 2013). Societies are becoming more diverse than ever, where it is necessary to form successful relationships with others through understanding, respect and collaboration.

Teaching grammar and how to speak according to the context is no longer applicable to meet the demands of the 21st century (Tohsaku 2013). Today, in addition to communication and intercultural communication skills, problem-solving, learning autonomy, life-long learning, and collaboration skills are required. These are not developed by patterned practice in classroom, such as role play and simple questions and answers. SNA suggests that students can develop them through interacting with others in real-life. Struggling to function in real-life should stimulate students' problem skills, learning autonomy and life-long learning. Working on tasks while cooperating and collaborating with others will help students to develop communication and intercultural communication skills.

SNA has been employed in the field of Japanese language education in various ways. Banks (2017) conducted the "Cool Japan Project" with international students learning Japanese at a university in Japan.

The design of the project was modeled after NHK's popular TV series, "Cool Japan." Students in groups investigated what they found cool about Japan and created short videos to introduce their points of view to the world. First, they discussed what they found cool about Japan. The students with similar interests created teams and outlines of their videos. One team, for instance, decided to talk about Kamakura. They interviewed Japanese students to investigate their views on Kamakura. Then, they went to Kamakura to see the things that the Japanese students had said were cool. Another team's theme was "Kosupure," or costume play. The students were attracted by people wearing many kinds of costumes and make-ups, but they did not know why they started wearing costumes. They interviewed people doing kosupure and why they thought it was cool. Although no instructions were given regarding how to create videos and what they had to include, all the teams went to places where they found something cool and interviewed local Japanese people to understand their views. Finally, they presented their videos to Japanese university students to exchange opinions and receive feedback. The international students who participated in this project found that it was an interesting way to learn Japanese culture. Their motivation to use Japanese and teamwork also increased.

Matsuda (2017) analyzed media literacy used by American and Japanese university students in a Facebook project based on SNA. It investigated how students used Japanese in order to connect with each

other on Facebook. It was revealed that students employed sentence-ending particles and changed the ends of the sentences in order to develop peer-relationships. Hirayama (2017) likewise analyzed how a Chinese student learning Japanese used Twitter to connect with people. Twitter was used in four processes: Translating, making friends, selecting what to read and what to write. At the beginning the student translated a Japanese tweet into Chinese and vice versa. Then, the student started using Twitter to make friends. Through following other users and exchanging greetings, the student expanded connections. But, soon it turned out to be pointless, because they did not give any meaning to the student's life. The student then started selecting what to read and what to write to expand his/her own interests. Reading and writing messages on Twitter in Japanese was not simply for improving Japanese. The student expanded his/her world around the interesting topics, through which he/she connected with others who shared the similar interests. Hirayama (2017) concluded that the whole process of using Twitter fit into the key concept of SNA and proposed that teaching and learning should be designed around "fun."

Shiratori and Shimizu (2017) employed SNA in a dynamic way. The international and Japanese students participated in the project of finding wells in the local area where the university was located. The students collaborated with local residents to identify and protect wells for national disasters. It aimed to increase opportunities for international students to use Japanese

in real life and improve their communication skills and problem-solving skills described in SNA. The project also encouraged the students to be familiar with matters of global society, such as how to live with national disasters and how to form relationships with aging population. The study examined the students' communication strategies employed for forming connections with students and local residents. It was revealed that the students with higher Japanese proficiency played a role of scaffolding communication and helped ones with lower proficiency to participate in the project.

Many practical reports were centered around the education of Japanese language and culture. There was little study on employing SNA for teaching English and intercultural communication, although SNA is applicable to many fields and subjects. The "world trend project" introduced in the following section is an example of employing SNA for developing English communication skills and cross-cultural awareness.

4. SNA for teaching English and intercultural communication: World trend project
4. 1 Place and participants

The world trend project was initiated by six Japanese university students in 2017. Three were male and three female who were enrolled in an intercultural communication seminar in their third year. First, the students discussed what they wanted to do in the seminar. The teacher (author) told them about the importance of "connecting" with people and the community in the process of learning

English. The students first could not think about how to establish connections with people outside their student lives. One of the plans that the students proposed was visiting local restaurants and writing reviews in English for tourists from overseas. But they could not imagine how they could "connect" with people through doing this. Going to a restaurant and writing reviews in English would be a great practice to use English, but it was not clear how they would reach those who might need English reviews. It was also revealed that there were many existing restaurant reviews.

Through long discussion, the students identified three keywords that they wanted to include in the project: The world culture, trends, foreign tourists in Japan. They created a plan for the project based on these keywords as follows:

● Objective: We will investigate trends around the world, such as music, fashion, and food. We will put collected information on Instagram, so that we can connect with many people as an originator of information.
● Method: We will interview foreign residents and tourists in Japan to collect information.
● Place of the project: Places where we are likely to meet tourists, such as, Harajuku, Shinjuku, and Asakusa.

The role of the teacher was to give advice and ask questions in order to help them to develop their ideas. It seemed important to let the students make their own decisions based on their interests. Only when the plan seemed unclear, did the teacher asked further questions, so that everyone could have more concrete ideas. The teacher also gave everyone an opportunity to speak their mind, every time they needed to decide something.

4.2 Schedule of the project

Students were separated into two teams based on their availability for conducting interviews. They randomly found non-Japanese looking people on the streets and asked questions. Interview questions were about trends of food, sports, music, and fashion in the countries where they were from. The students also asked how they perceived Japan and what they thought Japanese good points were. The teacher corrected English of the interview questions that the student created. There were some questions that seemed too vague to elicit clear answers. But the teacher left the question as they were, so that they could realize the issues and figure out how to fix them. The teacher joined the fieldwork and observed the students. The overall schedule is presented as Table 2.

4.3 What was seen from observations
4.3.1 The students

The students who had almost no experience of interacting with non-Japanese people in Japan were really afraid of reaching them at the beginning. Some felt overwhelmed by the entire situation, some were simply afraid of talking to strangers. With teacher's help, they were able to say "Hello" or "Excuse me" in English to initiate

The project was taken place based on the following schedule.

	Things to do
Week 1	Orientation: Why is "connecting" important?
Week 2	Discussion (1) What do we want to do for a project?
Week 3	Discussion (2) Making an outline of the project
Week 4	Preparation (1) Creating interview questions
Week 5	Preparation (2) Creating interview questions and practice
Week 6-7	Fieldwork and presentations (1): Students in teams went to conduct interviews. After the interviews, they reported their findings to class.
Week 8	Strategy meeting: The students discussed why things did not go well in the interviews. The teacher gave advice on how to overcome those difficulties.
Week 9-10	Fieldwork and presentations (2): Students in teams went to conduct interviews. After the interviews, they reported their findings to class.
Week 11-12	Discussion (3): What did we learn from the project?

interviews. They were reluctant to remain with a passersby alone, because they did not know how to overcome language barriers. They were worried about what to do when they could not understand interviewees' responses. One of the students mentioned that she was afraid of non-Japanese tourists' appearances, which were completely different from the Japanese appearances that she was familiar with. She did not know if one was angry or moody as she was not familiar with facial expressions of Western people in particular.

The students at the beginning approached elderly people who seemed more willing to talk, compared to young people. Soon they realized elderly people were not familiar with trendy fashion or food, and tried to talk to younger people. After a couple of interviews, the students seemed more confident about approaching tourists. They were able to initiate conversations, without much hesitation. They still had a difficult time understanding replies. In some cases, they knew the vocabulary, such as "salmon," but they could not catch the word, because it was pronounced differently than they were familiar with. Some interviewees were from Chile or Israel, whose first language was not English. The Japanese students were not familiar with those non-native speakers' accents and could not comprehend some answers, even though it was easy vocabulary.

The students also realized that many people did not have the concept of "trends."

For instance, some people answered "jeans" to the question："What kind of fashion is popular in your country?" Jeans are something that is widely used by many people, but it does not mean it is a trendy fashion. Likewise, when they asked about popular music, many people answered with their favorite genre, such as "jazz" or "pop." The students again realized that simply asking about popular music would not give them the answers that they wanted to hear.

The strategy meeting became an excellent opportunity for them to think about how to solve issues that they faced during the interviews. They were frustrated that they could not ask further questions, due to their limited English. The teacher gave three pieces of advice regarding the language barrier. First is that simple sentence like "Can you give me an example?" could extend a conversation and elicit more detailed answers. Second is to use other resources to collect more information. Even though somebody tells them a name of a band, the student may not be able to comprehend if they did not know the band. If they ask an interviewee to write down a name of a band, they can later find out who it is. Third is to say "I do not understand" or "Could you repeat again?" It was observable that the students said "Yes" or "Thank you" even though they did not understand what was said. They were doing so because they did not want to trouble the interviewees. If they tried to clarify the meaning, it could extend conversations, which would become additional practice of listening English. The students were able to conduct interviews much better in the second fieldwork. They went to talk to tourists without the teacher's help. They were able to collect better information, using the new strategy of interviewing.

The students also discussed the concept of "trends." In their mind, trends of fashion or music change every season, which are advertised in magazines and TVs. Some TV shows focus on trendy foods and introduce popular restaurants. They realized the concept of trends shared by Japanese people may not be the same as ones in other countries. Many people could not think about trendy food or fashion in their countries. It was an opportunity to think about Japan through considering the points of view of people from outside of Japan.

4.3.2 The people who answered interviews

Most people were willing to talk to the students, except for the ones who did not have time. Some of them were residents of Japan. They were not familiar with trends in their countries because they had been away for a while, but they were willing to answer both in English and Japanese. Many of them seemed happy to talk to Japanese students, especially when they were asked what they think of Japan. Some of them were having troubles finding their hotels or places that they wanted to go. After they answered the interview questions, the Japanese students helped them to find those places. It was the real-life moment that the students did not prepare or could not prepare in class. But they were able to be helpful, using their pre-existing knowledge and problem-solving

skills.

4.3.3 Expectations and the reality

It was observed that some of the Japanese students' expectations were different from what they experienced in the reality. Before starting the fieldwork, the students often talked about American people as foreigners. They also considered White people as native English speakers. They were afraid of failing to be functional in English in front of them. The people who answered in the interviews, however, were from all over the world. In fact, few Americans were found to be interviewees. Some of the White people were not from English speaking countries. Many of them were fluent in English, but communication barriers occurred not solely due to the students' lack of English skills. The issue of accents and pronunciations on both sides made it harder to achieve mutual understanding.

It was an excellent opportunity to break down stereotypes and learn about many countries in real-life situations. One of the students commented that they were able to talk to people whom they would never meet if they did not conduct the interviews. They could think about the countries that they would never think about if they did not meet those people.

5. Conclusion

In this project, the students were able to realize how to use English effectively to communicate with people from various backgrounds. Answers were not in the textbooks. The students had to find their own answers through struggling in real-life experience. The challenges that they faced in real-life situations made them think about different strategies and approaches for using the language. The improvements of the skills for the 21st century (Tohsaku 2013) were not tested using pre and post surveys. It was observable that the students gradually changed their attitudes of using English while figuring out how to break down the communication barriers. It required students to use collaborating, problem-solving skills and learning autonomy.

The definition of "connecting" may differ depending on the person. Some may perceive it as deep, life-long relationships, others may think about connections on social media. In this project, the students did not develop deep relationships with people whom they interviewed. However, they opened their world by collecting information from them and studying the food and songs that they had never heard of. On Instagram, they were also able to find connections with people outside their daily lives. It may seem superficial, but for those who did not have any relationships with outside Japan, it was a big "first step."

This study argues that SNA changes not only the style of language learning, but also the world views of students. The students may not remember what was correct English or what exactly interviewees said during the interviews. But, they do not forget the feelings of awkwardness and frustrations caused by the language barriers and the excitement of overcoming those barriers. The memory of trying hard

to help the tourists with directions might remain for a long time. Such feelings and memories can become a driving force for future language and cultural learning, which can expand and deepen connections with people and the global society. Going outside classroom and conducting tasks in real-life situations enabled the students to expand the possibility of learning. The contents of learning were unpredictable, but it was something that students gained and achieved by themselves. The style of language learning suggested by SNA may well change the dynamic of foreign language education. Such a transition seems necessary for the current globalized world where we need to live, work, learn, and collaborate together over the differences and commonalities.

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