Application of Metapragmatics to Language-Learning Research: A Longitudinal Study of Word Learning in Language Exchange Conversations

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Abstract
Second language acquisition (SLA) studies have not proposed a comprehensive theoretical and epistemological framework to capture both the object-level social interactions in which language learning occurs and meta-level practices of research describing it. Therefore, this study introduces the linguistic anthropological theory of “metapragmatics” into SLA research and demonstrates how it can manage both meta-level and object-level of social practices regarding language learning, with the primary focus on the latter. After considering SLA research in terms of the metapragmatic practice articulated by specific sociocultural perspectives, this study analyzes word learning during four months of language exchange conversations between two native and two non-native Japanese speakers. The results indicate that the state in which “someone has learned something” is indexically created through the metapragmatics of interaction, that is, by fading metapragmatic frames that focus on learning objects and related acts, highlighting the nonlinear, dynamic, indexical, and contextual aspects of language learning. This study concludes that the concept of metapragmatics can open new lines of SLA research to enhance the understanding of the social nature of learning and its research.

Keywords: metapragmatics; frame; second language acquisition; achievement of learning

Introduction
Since Firth and Wagner’s (1997) seminal article that argued for a reconceptualization of second language acquisition (SLA) research from a social and contextual perspective, considerable efforts have been made to reconceptualize SLA regarding what it means to learn a second language (L2), who L2 learners are, and what sociocultural context is involved and how (Atkinson, 2011; Cook, 2002; Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Larsen-Freeman, 2006, 2012; the Douglas Fir Group, 2016; van Lier, 2011).
Studies belonging to these “alternative approaches” (Atkinson, 2011) share a basic understanding that L2 learning is inseparable from social interaction; thus, researchers must consider various social dimensions of L2 learning to understand it properly. Based on this understanding, many studies have elucidated how L2 learning is embedded in socially co-constructed interactions inside or outside educational contexts (Brouwer & Wagner, 2004; Eskildsen, 2018; Eskildsen, & Theodorsdottir, 2017; Hellermann, 2018; Kasper, 2004, 2009; Markee, 2008; Nguyen, 2011; Svennevig, 2018).

However, one sociocultural dimension has rarely been considered in previous studies: description of L2 learning by a researcher. Whenever researchers describe L2 learning, they encounter the question of how to define (L2) learning. More precisely, they require a specific definition or criteria—explicit or implicit—of L2 learning to assess whether it occurred. In general, researchers of SLA have employed existing cognitive and social theories to determine such a definition or criteria. Often, theoretical frameworks of recent studies include conversation analysis (CA), sociocultural theory, situated learning, and language socialization (Brouwer & Wagner, 2004; Eskildsen, 2018; Kasper, 2004, 2009; Markee, 2008; Nguyen, 2011; Svennevig, 2018; Hall, 2018). However, describing L2 learning based on those theories is a sociocultural practice per se that reflects and reproduces specific perspectives and ideologies, as will be demonstrated subsequently. Although a similar type of self-reflexive recognition can be found in the field of critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2001) and some SLA studies that reconsidered the problematic concept of “competence” or “L2 learners” (Kramsch, 1986, 1993; Belz, 2002; Cook, 2002; Firth & Wagner, 1997; van Lier, 2011, Hall 2018), the necessity for researchers to examine their own practices of research from the sociocultural perspective has not been generally recognized in SLA studies.

To proceed with such self-reflexive work, researchers must manage at least two problems. First, the above-mentioned social theories of learning that have been a basis of recent SLA studies have restricted goals or scopes and are insufficient to examine research as a social practice.¹ Thus, researchers must employ other critical theories to conduct this reflexive work; however, this leads to a double standard situation in which L2 learning in social interactions and its description by researchers are examined using different frameworks. Second, considering the attitude of the researchers, having a reflexive critical acknowledgment of their work as a sociocultural practice that reflects and reproduces specific perspectives may make conducting their research challenging. These problems imply that SLA studies need a comprehensive theoretical and epistemological framework that can capture both the actual occurrences of L2 learning in social interactions and practices of describing them by researchers. Many possible candidates can enable researchers to critically examine their work, as critical discourse analysis has demonstrated (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Thus, our main objective here is to demonstrate how such a critical framework can be applied to describing and explaining L2 learning.

L2 learning per se is a sociocultural practice constituted by learners’ and their interlocuters’ use of language and other semiotic resources. SLA researchers take this practice as their research object,
which is also conducted through their language use. Thus, we can distinguish two levels of language use here: (1) the “object-level” language use by learners and their interlocutors and (2) the “meta-level” language use by researchers, which refers to the learners’ language use. Therefore, it is required that a new framework for SLA research is comprehensive enough to include both levels in its theoretical scope.

This study presents the semiotically focused linguistic anthropological theory of “metapragmatics” (Lucy, 1993; Silverstein, 1976, 1993, 2003; Urban, 2018; Wortham, 2003, 2005) and demonstrates how it can manage both the meta- and object-levels of social practices of L2 learning, with the primary focus on the latter. More precisely, this study aims to introduce metapragmatics into SLA research, demonstrate how it enables a unique understanding of L2 learning, and at the same time, provide a means for researchers of SLA to critically reflect on their work.

This article is organized as follows: first, it briefly introduces the concept of metapragmatics and demonstrates how it captures the sociocultural aspects of the meta-level practices of researchers describing L2 learning. Next, this article employs the concept to describe L2 learning in object-level social interactions and demonstrates its potential through a longitudinal analysis of word learning in L2 exchange conversations. Finally, the implications of introducing metapragmatics into SLA research and its future directions are discussed.

Metapragmatics: The linguistic anthropological conceptualization

Semiotically focused linguistic anthropology is a linguistic anthropological program mainly based on the theories of Silverstein (1976, 1985, 1992, 1993, 2003), who presented a means to understand language and human communication in terms of semiosis or sign process (Peirce, 1932). In his theory, “pragmatics concerns signs, principally those that make up actually occurring typically linguistically segmentable discourse, looked at from the point of view of their indexical connections to the contexts in which they occur,” and “[m]etapragmatics [...] deals with signs that represent or are about pragmatic signs” (Urban, 2018, p. 257-258). In other words, metapragmatics is a type of communication (i.e., language or sign use) that refers to communicative events and the elements thereof.

Notably, such references by metapragmatic signs “stipulate” object-level (i.e., pragmatic) discursive interaction (Silverstein, 1993). More specifically, the core function of metapragmatic signs is their “role[s] in constituting and framing ongoing discourse” (Mertz & Yovel, 2009, p. 252). This conceptualization is based on the understanding that only when there are metapragmatic functions simultaneously in play with pragmatic functions that constitute discursive interaction can individuals interpret what is occurring (Silverstein, 1993, p. 36). According to Silverstein (1993), “[s]igns functioning metapragmatically have pragmatic phenomena—indexical sign phenomena—as their semiotic objects; they thus have an inherently ‘framing,’ or ‘regimenting,’ or ‘stipulative’ character with respect to indexical phenomena” (p. 33). He also notes that “metapragmatic function serves to regiment indexicals into interpretable event(s) of such-and-such type that the use of language in interaction
constitutes (consists of)” (p. 37). To give an example, in the utterance “I order you to go,” the use of the performative verb “order” functions as a metapragmatic sign that explicitly (i.e., semantically) and reflexively stipulates the utterance to which it is embedded as an act of a type of “ordering.” Another example is when a contextualization cue (Gumperz, 1982) of a smile that has occurred with the utterance “I am so sorry” functions as an inexplicit (indexical) and reflexive metapragmatic sign that leads to a particular interpretation (e.g., insincerity).

However, a sign alone is insufficient to play a metapragmatic function because the contextualization of any sign is indeterminate or “almost limitlessly defeasible” (Silverstein, 1992, p. 55). Accordingly, a communicative event can be, in principle, interpreted in innumerable ways. There, what plays a powerful metapragmatic function is “poetic structure” or “a pattern of mutually presupposing indexical signs” (Wortham, 2005, p. 98). As Wortham (2003) succinctly stated, poetic structure “emerges, solidifies, and thus establishes a relevant context and a more plausible set of interpretations for a series of utterances” (p. 22; see also Silverstein [1985]). In the “I am so sorry” example, if the speaker’s smile were accompanied by other indexical cues such as a mocking tone, shrugging, and rising sentence-final intonation, they will together constitute a poetic structure that would lead to a more coherent interpretation of the utterance.

Meanwhile, in many cases, framing or regimenting pragmatic signs, namely, metapragmatics, is mediated by “metadiscourses.” Metadiscourses “are the explicit and implicit framings available in a given society for understanding social events as coherent” (Wortham, 2003, p. 20). In other words, metadiscourses “are publicly circulating devices for interpreting or regimenting their object discourses” (Wortham, 2003, p. 20) or ideologies on which individuals rely to interpret communicative events around them (Silverstein, 2003). In the “I order you to go” example, publicly circulating ideologies on the social category of the speaker (e.g., teacher) may function as metadiscourses that mediate interpretation of the utterance.

In this manner, in the semiotically focused linguistic anthropology, communication, or discursive interaction is conceptualized as a dialectic process of pragmatics (i.e., language or sign use that permits endless contextualization) and metapragmatics (i.e., regimentation of those signs to construct a coherent interpretation).

Additionally, in the field of SLA research, the term “metapragmatic” has often been used in pedagogically focused studies in the form of “metapragmatic awareness” (Bagherkazemi, 2020; Taguchi, 2015). In those SLA studies, “metapragmatic” is understood in terms of the referential “aboutness” of language use, and the main concern is to examine the extent to which L2 learners’ awareness of their language use is related to their pragmatic competence, which is mostly measured using conventional assessments (see Mertz & Yovel [2009] to compare how “metapragmatic awareness” is understood in linguistic anthropology). According to our literature review, no study has used the concept of metapragmatics in a linguistic anthropological sense to examine the social practices regarding language learning.
Description of learning as a metapragmatic practice

How, then, can metapragmatics capture the sociocultural dimension of describing L2 learning, that is, the meta-level practice of researchers? If the research of (L2) learning is understood as a practice that refers to certain phases of social interaction and interprets them in terms of learning, it can be considered a metapragmatic practice that stipulates object-level social interaction that permits unlimited interpretation as tokens of an activity type of “learning.” Based on this understanding, an essential problem for SLA researchers is to understand what it means to describe learning and the extent to which it reflects the specific perspectives or ideologies of those engaged in it.

Arbitrary nature of descriptions of learning

The ordinary concept of learning has two distinctive but interrelated aspects, namely, a “process” of certain ongoing acts of learning and a resultant “state” of those acts (cf. Berducci, 2011; Nishizaka, 2006). On the one hand, a state in which an individual has already learned something presupposes a process of learning; on the other hand, when considering certain acts as part of a process of learning, we always assume specific states the process will (successfully) result in. Although a process precedes a state in the actual sense, the opposite is true in an epistemological sense. Thus, to understand what it means to describe learning, we must base our analysis on the consideration of how the assessment of whether individuals are in a state where they have learned something (i.e., a state where learning has been achieved) is constructed.

The core criteria of such assessments seem to be “change” and “persistence” (cf. Koschmann, 2013; Nishizaka, 2006). When an individual is said to have learned something, an assumption is that a change has occurred, and it endures to a certain extent. However, assessments of the achievement of learning are more complex than these core criteria suggest because they include many other criteria, such as the following:

Location of change: Changes can occur either in the invisible mental processes (e.g., schema or cognitive structure) of an actor or in his/her observable acts; in the latter case, analysts can either focus on an individual’s acts or consider the related acts of others and the overall contexts in which those acts occur.

Identification of sameness: The identification of sameness precedes the perception of changes: individuals recognize multiple acts as tokens of the same activity type before perceiving a change (cf. Berducci, 2011; Koschmann, 2013). Additionally, the achievement of learning is often assessed in terms of the degree of sameness between changed acts and past acts of legitimate others (e.g., teachers).

Direction of change: The concept of learning often presupposes quantitative or qualitative improvements, namely, changes to a “desirable” state. The conventional approach to L2 learning reveals this implicit premise (e.g., directions from interlanguage to target language).
Biological/Physiological basis of change: The presence or absence of a biological or physiological basis of change can be a criterion to distinguish learning from changes occurred by “native response tendencies, maturation, or temporary states of the organism (e.g., fatigue, drugs, etc.)” (Hilgard & Bower, 1966, p. 2).

Intentionality/Consciousness: The presence or absence of intentionality or consciousness can be used as a criterion to distinguish learning from acquisition, as shown in traditional SLA studies (cf. Krashen, 1981).

Degree of persistency: The duration of changed states can differ, affecting the assessment of the achievement of learning; changes of limited duration are often assessed as having occurred by chance.

All these criteria demonstrate how the assessment of whether certain acts constitute learning can be arbitrary and highlight the importance of the metapragmatic dimension: analysts assess learning in the context of their unclarified assumptions.

SLA research as a metapragmatic practice
Recent SLA studies from the social perspective have borrowed definitions or criteria from various social theories of learning and have described L2 learning in social interactions by applying their terms: studies based on the framework of situated learning have described observed changes of L2 learners as “increasing participation in communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 49) (Brouwer & Wagner, 2004; Young & Miller, 2004); studies inspired by sociocultural theory have discussed language learning in terms of changes from other-regulation to self-regulation (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006); studies based on language socialization have described L2 learning as socialization through persistent participation in routine settings (Mickan, 2006; Ohta, 1999). Meanwhile, SLA studies that apply CA, which does not explicitly define what learning is (cf. Brouwer & Wagner, 2004), have attempted to understand L2 learning in terms of organizing social actions (Firth & Wagner, 2007; Kasper, 2009; Svennevig, 2018) or conceptualized it as the development of “interactional competence” (Markee, 2008; Nguyen, 2011). In this manner, various social theories have guided SLA researchers in the actual illustrations of L2 learning and how to describe this process. In other words, the various social theories have functioned as metadiscourses in the metapragmatic practice of describing L2 learning.

However, these studies have not fully identified the ideological dimensions of the theories on which they are based. For example, Wertsch (1991) implies that the conceptualization of development in Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory has ethnocentric ideologies in its background; as for situated learning and L2 socialization, they have been criticized for their conceptualization of learning (or socialization) as a linear, one-way process among asymmetrical participants and insufficient attention paid to conflicts (cf. He, 2003; O’Connor, 2003); CA has been criticized for its understanding of narrowly
conceptualized context (Blommaert, 2005) and its “ideological view of the social world” (Billig, 1999, p. 543). Thus, when SLA researchers rely on such theories in describing L2 learning, they are inevitably involved in reproducing specific perspectives.

Additionally, the main focus of most studies of SLA has been the aspect of the “process,” whereas the aspect of the “state” has rarely been discussed. This lack of consideration implies an epistemological limitation of the SLA literature because describing a process of learning always presupposes certain assumptions about the state in which it has been achieved. Furthermore, the insufficient critical reflection in SLA studies can be partially explained by the lack of consideration of the “state” because focusing on it can lead to the question on what basis do we stipulate the state in which an individual has (not) learned something.

Meanwhile, some SLA studies allude to innate problematics in describing learning by researchers. For example, Larsen-Freeman (2006), acknowledging the complexity and non-linearity of L2 learning, points out the unclarity of assessing “lasting development” from “messy little details” in behaviors of L2 learners (p. 613). In addition, in his ecological-semiotic approach to language learning, van Lier (2011) shows his emergentist view on L2 learning where language development is understood as a process that emerges through “never finished but always remain[ing] en route” semiosis (p. 388). Examining SLA research from the perspective of metapragmatics takes such views further to shed light on the inherently sociocultural aspects of describing L2 learning.

The case: Employing metapragmatics in describing L2 learning

Analytical focus

In the previous section, we demonstrated how the concept of metapragmatics illuminates the inherently sociocultural nature of the description of learning. Next, we examine how this concept can be utilized to describe L2 learning in social interactions.

As mentioned before, metapragmatics is always in play with the pragmatics of discursive interaction. Thus, we hypothesized that in a social interaction that seems relevant to learning from an analyst’s standpoint, the metapragmatic functions that lead to the idea that learning is occurring can be identified. Describing learning in this manner differs from that of conventional SLA research, where generally, an analyst relies on particular metadiscourses (i.e., existing theories) to assess who learned what. In contrast, an analyst’s work following this approach is to describe metapragmatics in the interaction. More specifically, the analyst describes the metapragmatic practices of participants through which they indexically create a state in which an individual has learned something.

The analytic focus here is on the aspect of the “state” rather than on the “process.” This focus on the state has been inspired by several CA studies of learning that understand learning as a phenomenon “achieved” through interaction. For example, Nishizaka (2006) analyzed a four-year-old child’s violin lesson. During the lesson, the child performed what the teacher had instructed in a lesson conducted one month prior. She bowed as she had been taught, and the teacher gave her a positive verbal
evaluation. Nishizaka pointed out that the process was publicly displayed and was thus accessible to all the participants and that learning was “ascribed” to the child through this sequence of interaction (i.e., “showing-paying attention-evaluating”). This result suggests an important point: any observable change per se cannot be regarded (by analysts) as the achievement of learning.

Additionally, Berducci (2011) analyzed micro-longitudinal interactions in which a biochemist taught lab techniques to a technician. Although the study’s main focus was the social nature of the “process” of learning, the author articulated how his perception of the achievement of learning had been established (e.g., with reference to the publicly displayed acts of participants and the nature of the context). Koschmann (2013) proposed a similar argument: “[o]ur task as investigators is not to certify that learning has occurred, for that is a member’s matter, but rather to give an account of just how members conduct the investigations into the regularities [...]” (pp. 1039-1040). Taking an emic perspective of participants, these studies suggest that an examination of how learning is “achieved” through interaction would result in a new description of L2 learning.

Here, we raise two points regarding Nishizaka’s (2006) analysis. First, Nishizaka analyzed an institutional situation in which a participant’s identity as a teacher or learner was foregrounded, and the achievement of learning was their greatest concern. However, learning is a ubiquitous phenomenon that occurs in settings other than explicitly educational ones (Eskildsen, 2018; Firth & Wagner, 2007; Svennevig, 2018) where participants’ orientation to acts concerned with learning is not explicitly demonstrated (cf. Nguyen, 2011). Thus, examining other types of interactions can lead to a deeper understanding of learning. Further, Nishizaka analyzed the interaction where learning was “ascribed,” without examining subsequent interactions. However, from the perspective of metapragmatics, the achievement of learning should be understood as indeterminant or defeasible (Silverstein, 1992; Wortham, 2003). To illustrate, as long as the achievement of learning emerges through a dialectical process of pragmatics and metapragmatics (see Section 2), it can be refuted or defeasible in subsequent interactions. Thus, a sufficient amount of longitudinal data is required to capture the dynamics of the achievement of learning.

Analytical tool

This section examines how L2 learning is achieved through social interaction, that is, how a state in which “an individual has learned something” is indexically created through the metapragmatics of interaction. The analytical tool employed is the concept of “frame” (Goffman, 1974).

Frames are the organizational principles that define everyday situations and answer the question “What is going on here and now?” For example, the frame of “class” denotes children sitting at desks as students and an adult standing before them as a teacher and their acts as linked to such roles to the best extent possible. A frame allows other frames to be inserted therein and thus may have a “laminated” structure (Goffman, 1974). For instance, when students playfully imitate their teacher, this
can be understood as a joke, with reference to the frame of “play” inserted in the frame of “class.” In this way, frames function metapragmatically, providing contextual basis for interpreting an action’s meaning.

A metapragmatic frame is mostly indexed not by utterances explicitly referring to it but indirectly by a poetic pattern (cf. Silverstein, 1993; Wortham, 2003) interwoven with various indexical signs related to, for example, the forms and contents of utterances, sequential organization of interaction, and arrangement of participants and artifacts. This pattern indexes a particular frame as relevant, and in turn, the meaning of the signs that comprise the pattern is regimented by that frame. Thus, in terms of metapragmatics, we can conjecture that learning in interaction is achieved not only through specific acts oriented to it (e.g., a reflexive metapragmatic sequence of “showing-paying attention-evaluating” in Nishizaka’s [2006] analysis) but also, even more generally, in an indirect manner, namely, by various signs in the interaction indexing metapragmatic frames that enable interpretations as such.

Participants and procedure

This study analyzed word learning in a series of Japanese-English language exchange conversations that were held 12 times in 4 months by two female L2 Japanese intermediate-level speakers, Kahi and Yuna, and two native Japanese speakers, Sami and the only male participant, Taku. All the participants were undergraduates from the same university in Tokyo and were gathered by the author as individuals who wanted opportunities to speak their L2. Kahi and Yuna, whose native language was Korean, were proficient speakers of English with more than three years of experience of sojourning abroad while attending high school. Both students were enrolled in the university’s English degree course, where most classes were offered in English. Sami and Taku were normal Japanese degree course students with an advanced level of English. Kahi and Yuna were friends and Sami and Taku were acquaintances, but the non-native speakers and native speakers were not acquainted. All the participants provided informed consent, and their identities and personal data remain confidential.

The conversations were held in a seminar room at the university. Participants sat face-to-face at a square table, with a 360° camera and a voice recorder installed in the center. All conversations were recorded; the second conversation has only audio data because of a camera malfunction. The conversations were transcribed based on the recorded video and audio data, and in the analysis, both the transcriptions and video data were used.

The language exchange sessions were free conversations with a friendly atmosphere, not explicit L2 learning-teaching sessions. We did observe cases of word teaching and learning sequences, but all of them were embedded in conversations on the main topics, as observed in language learning “in the wild” (Eskildsen, 2018; Svennevig, 2018).

The duration of the participants’ conversations was 1 hour each, and during the first meeting, they decided to allocate 30 minutes to each Japanese and English. Negotiations about switching
languages were observed in each session, and, except for the first meeting, the Japanese verb *kirikaeru* (切り替える, ‘to switch’ or ‘to change’) was used in all of the negotiations. The word was never used outside of the negotiation phase. Our analysis focuses on the longitudinal changes in interactions concerning the use of the verb *kirikaeru*, with particular focus on the acts of Kahi, one of the two non-native speakers. Although the participants had different cultural backgrounds, significant differences in their ways of interacting that might have influenced the analysis were not observed.

**Longitudinal analysis**

The word *kirikaeru* was first observed in Sami’s suggestion, *sorosoro, kirikaeru?* (‘shall we switch?’). At that time, Kahi had only partial (or wrong) knowledge of the word. However, she understood it through the following repair sequence and then incorporated it into her own utterances (for readability, in the following excerpts, we denote each participant using the first initial of their name and the first initial of the native language; for example, “Sj” denotes Sami, whose native language is Japanese) (see Appendix for symbols and abbreviations used).

Second Conversation (audio data only)

01-Sj: sorosoro, *kirikaeru*?

soon switch

*shall we switch?*

02 Tj: ima nan? (pun)

now what minutes

*what’s the time*

03 Sj: [san ji han.

three o’clock half

3:30

04 Kk: *kirikaeru*=

switch

*kirikaeru*
05 Tj: =kirikaema(su ka.)
    switch-POL Q
    shall we switch.

06→Yk: kirikkaeru?
    switch
    kirikkaeru?

07→Kk: kirikare- kirikkaeru wa: fuku wo kaeru no: imi?
    switch TOP cloth ACC change LK meaning
    does kirikkaeru mean changing clothes?

08 Sj: [un? uun? kirikaeru wa: suitchi?
    huh? no switch TOP switch
    huh? no. kirikaeru is to switch?

09 Tj: [kiri- un? kirikaeru wa (.)
    huh? switch TOP
    huh? kirikaeru is

10 Yk: suit[chi ga-
    switch NOM
    to switch is

11 Kk: [kirikae /ru †: ((Korean intonation))
    switch
    oh, kirikaeru

12 Tj: fuku wa, futsu ni fuku wo kaeru.
    cloth TOP normally cloth ACC change
    in case of clothes, it is just fuku wo kaeru

13 Sj: kigaeru.
    change clothes
    kigaeru

14 Tj: kigaeru a
    change clothes oh
    kigaeru oh

15 Kk: ['a, kigaeru. a::
    oh change clothes oh
    oh, kigaeru oh

(()(omission of 33 seconds of conversation))
In this conversation, at least three frames are relevant. The first is the frame of “language exchange.” This frame explains the situation in which the participants join the conversation in Japanese and English and negotiate which language to use. The second frame is that of “teaching/learning” inserted into the frame of “language exchange.” This frame is indexed by the repair sequence related to the word kirikaeru through which the participants’ asymmetrical identities of “L2 learner” and “native speaker” became relevant (cf. Eskildsen, 2018; Kasper, 2004). The third frame is that of “play,” which is observed after the repair sequence. This frame is indexed by Kahi’s utterance with a unique intonation (kirikaema↑shō↓::) (21), the subsequent laughter of the participants, and Sami’s kirikaemashō:: (23) that is, considering ordinary Japanese intonation, a mimic of Kahi’s utterance. The participants’ activities of teaching/learning and play centered on the word kirikaeru, and the repetition of the word plays an important role in indexing both the frames of “teaching/learning” and “play.”

Here, Kahi is demonstrating ownership of the word by using it, integrating it into a new syntactic structure, and laminating it with her affective stance. Thus, we may state that Kahi has “learned” a new word. However, in terms of the achievement of learning, we cannot hastily conclude as such. There is no instance of the ascription of learning by Sami and Taku (e.g., positive evaluation) (cf.
Nishizaka, 2006), and Kahi did not demonstrate her ability to use the word consistently. Thus, in an interactional sense, whether Kahi has learned the word remains undetermined.

After 1 week, Kahi attempted to use the word kirikaeru again in the phase of switching languages.

Third conversation (1 week later)

01 Yk:  jik, ka:::n  *eotteoghai? eigo?
          time                  what should I do         English
          time, what should I do, English?

02 Kk:  [ei- ei- *eou:ya
          wow

03 Sj:  are? eigo::
          hm? English
          hm? English

04–Kk:  [ima kara eigo [de
          now from English with
          from now, to English

05 Yk:  [eigo  @[@
          English
          English

06 Sj:  [eigo de chotto shaberu.((with a smile))
          English with little talk
          ((we’re gonna)) speak in English a little

07–Kk:  [kaekiri? ((points at Sj with her index finger with a smile))
          switch-VS
          kaekiri?

08 Yk:  [a, ima kara
          oh now from
          oh, from now

09(0.5)

10 Kk:  [kirikae.
          switch-VS
          kirikae
11 Sj: kirikae. ((with a smile))
   switch-VS
   kirikae
12 Tj kiri[kae @ @
   switch-VS
   kirikae
13 Yk: [ka@e]kiri @ @
   switch-VS
   kaekiri
14 Sj: [kiri[kae ((twists her right hand))] @ @
   switch-VS
   kirikae
15 Kk: [kirikae[@ @[@ @] @ @
   switch-VS
   kirikae
16 Sj: @ @ @
17 Tj: [kak[ekiri
   switch-VS
   kaekiri
18 Yk: [kirikae @ @
   switch-VS
   kirikae
19 Sj: kae[kiri
   switch-VS
   kaekiri
20 Kk: [a, kirikae:=
   switch-VS
   kirikae
21 Sj: =kirikae.
   switch-VS
   kirikae
22 Kk: kirikaeru:: kirikaema↑ shō ↓:[@ @[@ @
   switch switch-POL-VOL
   kirikaeru let's switch
In the negotiation of switching languages initiated by Yuna, Kahi said *ima kara eigo de, kaekiri?* (‘from now, switch to English?’) and asked for confirmation (see Kahi’s gesture when pointing to Sami in line 07). Immediately, Kahi observed her mistake and corrected it without assistance (10). Her mistake caused repetitions and the laughter of the others.

By requesting confirmation, Kahi indexed the continuity with the prior conversation and thus the frame of “teaching/learning.” However, the concern here is not merely a frame of “teaching/learning.” Judging from Kahi’s gesture and smile, she seems not to be inviting Sami to teach her the right form but to be appealing somewhat playfully to her that she remembers the word (although she did not). Furthermore, the other participants’ reactions to Kahi’s mistake (laughter and repetitions of the wrong word form) indicate that they were not treating Kahi’s error as a mere object of correction.

In Line 22, Kahi said *kirikaema†shō*: (‘Let’s switch’) with the same intonation as in the second conversation, which provoked Sami laughter. In Line 24, Yuna intentionally incorporated Kahi’s error into her utterance of the suggestion of switching (*kaekirimasho*), and Kahi also laughed and repeated it (25). In this excerpt, again, Kahi used the word *kirikaeru* in the frame of “play.”

The subsequent two points deserve further examination. First, the series of repetitions of the word observed between Lines 07 and 21 were all in the form of a verb stem that does not contain deictic elements, such as tense, modality, or mood.\(^8\) Here, the use of the verb stem is not indicative of using the word in a contextualized manner (as an utterance of suggesting switching languages) but of the orientation to the word form, namely, a metasemantic orientation (Silverstein, 1993). Second, in Line 14, Sami’s gesture of twisting her right hand (representing the meaning of *kirikaeru*) is notable. The meaning of the word had been explained in the prior session, and Kahi used it with an appropriate understanding of its meaning (but in the wrong form). Here, Sami’s gesture is semantically redundant. Sami seems to be treating Kahi as an individual who has not fully learned the word and was helping her use the word properly (see Svennevig [2018] for a similar use of an iconic gesture that orients to an activity of “teaching a new word”). This interpretation is supported, because Sami’s gesture occurred after the word was repeated many times, including by her.
Fourth Conversation (1 week later)

01-Sj:  sorosoro, (1) {twists her right hand})
        soon
02   kirikaemasuka (with a smile))
        switch-POL    Q
        shall we switch?
03  Kk:
        [kirikae
        switch-VS
        kirikae
04  Yk:
        "kirikae"{(with a smile)}
        switch-VS
        kirikae
05--Kk:
        kirikaemasuka {ma\¹shō↓: ((looks at Yk and raises her right fist with a smile))
        switch-POL-VOL
        let’s switch
06  Tj:
        [@@
07  Yk:
        @
08  Sj: kirikaemasu ka. (with a smile))
        switch-POL    Q
        shall we switch
09  Kk:  ha:i.
        okay

The negotiation of switching languages in the fourth conversation was much simpler than those in the previous conversations. In Lines 01 and 02, after gesturing by twisting her right hand, Sami suggested switching to English by saying *kirikaemasuka* (‘shall we switch’). In the middle of this utterance, she smiled. This smile can be interpreted as indicating her expectation of the frame of “play” to be evoked by the use of the word *kirikaeru*, because no other contextual clues lead to the interpretations except the one presented here. As in the third conversation, Kahi and Yuna repeated Sami’s utterance by using the verb stem *kirikae* (03 and 04). Kahi then looked at Yuna and said *kirikaemasuka* {shō↓: (‘Let’s switch’) with a playful intonation and a gesture of pushing up the fist (05), evoking laughter and smiles from the other participants. After the second and third conversations, the word *kirikaeru* became associated with the frame of “play,” rather than being treated as a mere object of learning; it became an indexical cue of the frame of “play” and thus performed as a reflexive metapragmatic sign.
Fifth Conversation (1 week later)

01 Kk:  ima, [e- eigo de
         now        English with
         now, to English

02 Sj:  [nanka eigo ni shita
         H English to change-PAST-MOD

03 hou ga i [ka na
         side NOM good Q IP

well, is it better switch to English?

04 Kk:  [kirikae?
         switch-VS

05 Tj:  sō desu [(ne)
         so COP-POL IP

you're right.

06 Sj:  [kirikaeru. ((looks at Kk and smiles))
         switch

07 Kk:  kirika- [oo:: ((clenches her fists with a smile))
         wow

08 Tj:  [kiri- [oo: @@ ((with a smile))
         wow

09 Sj:  [wa:: ((gesture of clapping))
         wo::w

10 Kk:  [kirikaeru.
         switch

11 Sj:  kirikae[ru.
         switch

12 Kk:  [ha::ha::[ha:ha@@ kirikaeru ka ↑na:: @@[@ ((looking at Yk with a loud voice))
         switch Q IP

ha::ha::ha: ha Shall I switch?
In Line 04, for the first time, Kahi used the verb stem kirika in the correct form. As in the third conversation, she used the phase of negotiation of switching languages as an opportunity to illustrate her memory. When Sami confirmed that Kahi had used the correct form (06), Kahi struck a victory pose while saying wa:: (‘wow’) (07). She looked at Yuna and said haːhaːhaːhaː in a loud voice, as if to brag (12). Next, Kahi laughed and said kirikaerukaː (‘Shall I switch?’) in a satisfied tone. Taku reacted to her by saying ooː (‘wow’) (08). Sami also made a gesture of clapping while saying waː (‘woːw’) (09). These acts of the participants are reminiscent of a quiz game. Kahi reinterpreted the phase of switching languages as a quiz given to herself, acting as the participant who presented a correct answer. Additionally, Sami and Taku played the role of the audience who cheered for Kahi (notably, Sami did not truly applaud but made a gesture of applause without sound). This pseudo-frame indexically brought about by the participants’ hilarious acts can be called the frame of “quiz game.”

The excerpt from the fifth conversation is reminiscent of Nishizaka’s (2006) ascription of learning; Kahi publicly displayed that she could use the word correctly, and Sami and Taku paid attention to her utterance and evaluated it positively. They acknowledged that Kahi had learned the word. Unlike the case analyzed by Nishizaka, however, this sequence indexed not so much the frame of “teaching/learning” as the frame of a “quiz game” in which the participants played their pseudo-roles. Furthermore, the ascription of learning here does not guarantee the complete achievement of learning, as will be observed in the later conversations below.

Sixth to Ninth Conversations

Because of the limited space, we will omit the excerpts of the sixth to ninth conversations and summarize the noticeable changes observed in them. These four conversations generally presented simpler looks compared to the previous ones (with eight lines of scripts for the sixth, seventh, and ninth conversations each and ten lines for the eighth conversation). In these conversations, all suggestions for switching languages using the verb kirikaeru were initiated by Sami.

In the seventh conversation, two noticeable changes occurred. The first is the disappearance of Sami’s gesture of twisting her hand, which was observed in all conversations except for the fifth (and the second conversation without video data). The gesture had not been observed since then, implying Sami’s recognition that Kahi and Yuna already knew the meaning of the word. The second is the disappearance of the use of the verb stem (kirikae). As mentioned, the use and repetition of the verb stem was related to the participants’ orientation to the word form and evoked the frames associated with it. The verb stem was not observed in the eighth and ninth conversations, indicating that Yuna and Kahi
had become able to use the word in its correct form.

In the ninth conversation, the negotiation about switching languages became more succinct, where Sami’s suggestion (kirikaeru?) was accepted with simple responses by Yuna (°kirikaeru?° un. ‘shall we switch? yes’) and Kahi (un. sōdane: ‘yes. yeah’). There, no attention was paid to the word, and no insertive frame was indexed.

Tenth Conversation (1 week later from the ninth conversation)

01-Kk:  ki-kirikaeru?
        switch
        shall we switch?

02 Sj:  kiri[kaeru?]
        switch
        shall we switch?

03 Kk:  [kirikae[ru?]
        switch
        shall we switch?

04 Yk:  [nan: ji=
        what o’clock
        what time...

05 Sj:  =sō da ne
        so COP IP
        yeah

06 Yk:  a: ([..])
        oh

07 Kk:  [ima sanjup pun.
        now thirty minutes
        it’s now 30 minutes

08 Sj:  u:n.
        hm

09 Kk:  un.
        hm

In the tenth conversation, for the first time, Kahi used the word kirikaeru in the correct verb form as an utterance proposing to switch languages, rather than as a repetition of other participants’ utterances. In response to Kahi’s ki-kirikaeru? (‘shall we switch?’) (01), Sami repeated and asked back (02), evoking another repetition from Kahi (03). The negotiation of switching languages was completed
with Sami’s consent (sōdane ‘yeah’) (03) and several following turns. Notably, compared with the fifth conversation, no evaluative reaction to Kahi’s correct use of the word was elicited. Kahi also did not show any sense of accomplishment or satisfaction. Kahi’s kirikaeru? was no longer worth noticing for all the participants. Such an absence of attention indicates that the participants expected Kahi to use the word properly. She acted as a person who had already “learned” it, and the others treated her accordingly. Thus, here, the state in which Kahi had already learned the word was indexically created by the absence of attention; nonetheless, this does not guarantee the “complete” achievement of learning.

Eleventh Conversation (3 weeks later)

01 Sj: ((checks the time on the video camera))
02 Yk: a, furikaer: oh look back-VS
           oh, furikaer
03→Kk: furi-*ani kiri[kae? ((looks at Yk)) no switch-VS
           furi-no, kirikaer?
04 Yk: [ki- kiri[kae @@ switch-VS
       kirikaer
05 Sj: [kirikaeru? switch kirikaeru?
06→Tj: [o::: wo:w
07 Kk: kiri[kaeru? ((looks at Sj and Tj in order)) switch
       kirikaeru?
08 Tj: [kiri[kaeru. switch kirikaeru
09 Yk: [wasure@ta] [kirikaeru? forget-PAST switch
       I forgot. kirikaeru?
After observing Sami check the time, Yuna attempted to suggest switching languages for the first time, but she did not use the correct word (furikae is the stem of the verb furikaeru, which means ‘to look back’). Instead, Kahi presented the correct word (in the form of verb stem) in Line 03. Here, Yuna and Kahi are in different situations. In contrast to Yuna, who explicitly admitted to having forgotten the word (09), Kahi demonstrated that she still remembered it after three weeks of blanks. However, Kahi was not treated as having completely learned the word. First, her correction was accompanied by a rising intonation that can be interpreted as her uncertainty of the form, which, together with Yuna’s error, invited Sami’s presenting the correct form (05). Additionally, Taku demonstrated an evaluative attitude (o::) toward Kahi (06). Here, we observe, again, the use of a verb stem, a repair sequence, repetitions of the word, and an evaluative attitude. Again, all these signs index the frame of “teaching/learning,” which is relevant for Yuna and Kahi. Thus, this instance of interaction indicates that Kahi’s state of having learned the word that had been achieved through the prior conversations (especially the tenth conversation) was indirectly and partially denied again.

Twelfth Conversation (1 week later)

01 Sj: kirikaeru?=
switch
shall we switch?

02 Kk: =un. kirikaeru. un un. nijup pun datta yo.
okay switch yes yes twenty minutes COP-PAST IP
okay. let’s switch. yes, yes. it was already 20 minutes.

03 Tj: [nijup pun tte [hayai desu ne
twenty minutes TOP fast COP-POL IP
20 minutes is so fast

04 Sj: [un.
hm

05 Kk: [un un un.
hm hm hm

06 Yk: u:n. @@
hmm
In this last conversation, Kahi answered Sami’s proposal *kirikaeru*? (01) with a succinct utterance of *un. kirikaeru*. (‘okay, let’s switch’) (02). Her repetition of the word served as an acceptance of the proposal without further implications. The word *kirikaeru* was not treated as noteworthy, indicating once again the participants’ recognition that Kahi already knew the word and could properly use it. Here, Kahi’s learning of the word was non-explicitly and indexically achieved again.

**Discussion**

In summary, in our longitudinal analysis of the language exchange conversations, we identified three frames (each not strictly distinct from the others) inserted in the frame of “language exchange”: “teaching/learning,” “play,” and “quiz game.” Those frames were indexed by patterns that consisted of various acts by the participants such as repeating the word *kirikaeru*, using the verb stem, repairs, smiles and laughter, and gestures. As the sessions proceeded, such acts (and those frames indexed by them) disappeared gradually and perceptibly. Thus, the last conversation had only a brief illustration; no repairs, evaluations, or laughter were observed; there were only utterances for negotiation of switching languages. The word *kirikaeru* (and its use) became embedded in the context of switching languages and was backgrounded. Through this process, Kahi (and not necessarily Yuna) became indexed as an individual who could use the word appropriately. Thus, we conclude that the metapragmatic frame that indexically created the state in which Kahi had already learned the word was not a specific frame but the transition of frames, namely, the transition to the increasing absence of insertive frames that focalize the learning object and related acts.

This analysis demonstrates the dynamics of metapragmatic practice in social interaction regarding learning. As mentioned before, Nishizaka (2006) presented an important point that learning is “achieved” through interaction. Adding to this point, our analysis demonstrates that a state where “an individual has learned something” is only temporary because it occurs in the ebb and flow of interaction. Learning, once ascribed to an individual through interactional sequences, such as “showing-paying attention-evaluating,” can be denied in subsequent interactions. Furthermore, in contrast to Nishizaka’s (2006) analysis, where learning was considered to be achieved when participants oriented to the learning objects and related acts, our analysis confirms that it is achieved in a more indirect (indexical) manner, namely, through the gradual absence of such orientation.

In this manner, the analytical concept of metapragmatics can capture learning in interactions as an inherently dynamic, contextual, and indexical practice that always allows room for defeasibility. This does not necessarily mean the same thing as the nonlinear process of learning, as argued by previous studies (Firth & Wagner, 2007; Hall, 2018; Kramsch, 1986; Larsen-Freeman, 2006, 2012). As discussed above, identifying the processes of learning (regardless of being linear or nonlinear) presupposes certain assumptions about a state in which it has been successfully achieved. Since such assumptions are ideological, culture-specific, and arbitrary in nature, they can always be refuted and modified, which further results in denying the status of acts that have been considered embodying the
process of learning. In other words, the process of learning is not merely nonlinear but is essentially
defeasible, depending on the treatment of the resultant state. The analysis of this study indicates that
such refutes, or modifications of the state of having learned something also occur through
metapragmatics in social interactions, as observed especially in the eleventh conversation where Kahi’s
state of having learned the word *kirikaeru* was inexplicitly denied by interactions of the participants
(including herself). This shows that participants of interaction as well as researchers are actively
involved in the dialectic practice of metapragmatics.

**Conclusion: The “meta” of metapragmatics in SLA research**

This study began by noting that SLA research needs a comprehensive theoretical epistemological
framework that captures both object-level social interactions in which L2 learning occurs and meta-level
practices of analysts describing it. This article attempted to demonstrate that metapragmatics can
comprise such a comprehensive framework. What was common in both the meta- and object-level
considerations herein is that stipulating what counts as learning results from socially embedded
metapragmatic practice. This is a reminder for researchers of SLA that they are inevitably involved in
the social practices of language use, and this study shows that they can analyze, on the same theoretical
plane, their practices along with the practices of L2 learners under investigation.

Here, however, we must discuss an anticipated concern, that is, that invoking metapragmatics
to study L2 learning is in itself a metapragmatic practice. This study proceeded by recognizing that any
attempt to describe learning is a metapragmatic practice that reflects specific perspectives and
ideologies. Invoking the theory of metapragmatics is no exception. For example, the claim made in this
study that learning is achieved through the metapragmatics of interactions is explicitly metapragmatic.
The analysis of L2 learning utilizing the concept of “frame” is also a metapragmatic practice that
regulates the meaning of the interaction with reference to the conceptual frame of L2 learning,
restraining other diverse meanings in the interaction. Furthermore, the theory of metapragmatics reflects
specific perspectives: the linguistic anthropological and Peircean world views. However, the theory of
metapragmatics is fundamentally different from other theories in that it enables researchers to examine
their studies in the same manner as they examine the objects of their studies. Metapragmatics is a theory
of reflexive (self-referential) modes of signs (Lucy, 1993) and is thus capable of providing a theoretical
perspective and conceptual tools for researchers to examine their research, including research based on
the same concept. In other words, metapragmatics can provide reflexivity (in Clifford and Marcus’s
[1986] critical sense) to the research of L2 learning.

Metapragmatics can open new lines of further SLA research: (a) investigations of diverse
metapragmatic processes through which learning is achieved; (b) clarifications of what types of
metadiscourse (ideologies) articulate the metapragmatics of learning and how; and (c) examinations of
the indexical entailment (Silverstein, 2003) of such metapragmatic practices. These lines of research will
elucidate the dynamic relationship between the object- and meta-level practices regarding learning.
namely, the dialectic process of pragmatics and metapragmatics. In this manner, metapragmatics will lead to a deeper understanding of the inherently social nature of L2 learning and provide a richer and more self-reflexive sense of what is involved in the research of learning.

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**Notes**

1. For example, CA, a methodology for which the objective is to clarify the social organization of “talk-in-interaction,” is unsuitable for examining the practice of research, which is mainly based on written text. Further, other social theories of learning, such as the sociocultural theory, situated learning, and language socialization, because of their specified goals to explain what learning (or development) is or how it occurs, have limited scopes to explain various social practices (e.g., describing learning).

2. Here, the terms “object-level” and “meta-level” of language use (or social practice) are used in the sense of Jakobson’s (1987[1960]) distinction of two levels of language: the “object language” and “metalanguage.” To borrow Mertz & Yovel’s (2009)’s words, “[object language] is used to talk of ‘things’ and characterizes most of natural language, while [metalanguage] is used to talk of language and characterizes (according to Tarski) logic—and obviously much of linguistic discourse” (p. 251). This distinction was extended to the distinction between “pragmatics” and “metapragmatics” by Silverstein (1976, 1993).

3. Note that what is relevant here is Peirce’s “semiotics” that is well known for its trichotomy of signs (i.e., icon, index, and symbol), not Saussurean “semiology” whose primary concern is signs based on arbitrary and conventional (i.e., “symbolic” in Peircean terminology) relationships between signifiant and signifié. Although these two theories of sign overlap in some ways, it is acknowledged that differences exist in terms of their scope and primary interests (Daylight, 2012).

4. In SLA studies, the term “metadiscourse” has often been utilized to examine academic writings of language learners (Kojima et al., 2019; Zarei & Mansoori, 2007) in the framework of “metadiscourse analysis” in which the term refers to “the commentary on a text made by its producer in the course of speaking or writing” (Hyland, 2017, p. 16). However, as noted below, the term is conceptualized in a different, or much broader way, in linguistic anthropological studies.

5. Nishizaka (2006) and Berducci (2011) have pointed out that “learning” constitutes two types of verbs, namely, the achievement verb and process verb (Ryle, 1963); the former describes the results of certain acts, and the latter depicts the processes of certain acts.

6. However, describing learning using the concept of metapragmatics is not the same as CA’s *emic
approach, since metapragmatics is an analytical concept applied from an analyst’s perspective. This fact makes it possible to capture meta-level practices of analysts (as presented in the previous section) as well as object-level social interactions (as we will demonstrate subsequently).

7. As Jakobson (1987[1960], pp. 69-71) pointed out, repetition brings focus to the message itself. Repetition in discourse functions metapragmatically through constructing the cohesive (or poetic) structure of text, which indexes relevant context (Silverstein, 1985).

8. From the form, kirikae can be interpreted not only as a stem of the verb kirikaeru, of which -ru is an inflecting ending but also as a nominal form of the verb. However, in this excerpt, there is no linguistic context where kirikae can be identified as a noun instead of a stem (e.g., kirikae ga muzukashi “switching is difficult”). The participants attempt to use the word as a verb, and it seems more appropriate to regard kirikae as the verb stem.

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**Appendix**

Transcript Conventions

- the point at which overlapping talk starts
- falling (final) intonation
- slight rising intonation
- rising intonation
- marked shift in pitch
- elongation of a syllable
- false start
= no gap between the two lines
@ laugh
(1) silence for one second
(···) unclear or unintelligible speech
(word) transcriber’s doubt about a word
((word)) comments
*word* noticeably quiet utterance
*word* Korean words
word grammatical or pragmatic error
ACC Accusative
COP Copular
H Hesitation marker
IP Interactional particle
LK Linking nominal
MOD Modifying form
NOM Nominative
PAST Past form
POL Polite form
Q Question marker
TOP Topic marker
VOL Volitional
VS Verb stem