Current Research Projects – Rue Burch
(as of August 2018)

Activity Transitions in Japanese Oral Proficiency Interviews (with Gabriele Kasper, University of Hawai’i at Manoa & Waka Tominaga, Kapi’olani Community College)

Oral Proficiency Interviews incorporate multiple activities, including the examiner-led interview and a role-play chosen based upon the examiner’s in situ assessment of the examinee’s proficiency. This leads to a number of potential difficulties for the participants. First, the examiner must signal the transition between the interview and the role-play in such a way that the examinee understands that the turn taking structure is about to change. Second, the examiner must frame the directions for the role-play in such a way that the examinee can provide relevant ratable talk within a constrained time period. This project involves two studies focusing on each of these potential problems, paying special attention to how documents (i.e. the role-play prompt cards) and embodied resources (i.e. gaze and gesture) play integral roles in the co-accomplishment of the activity transition.

Host-Family Interaction as site for developing Interactional Competence

Host-family conversations provide an opportunity for study-abroad learners to speak in ways that are less constrained than they often experience in the classroom. This study tracks learners across their 6-week Rice in Country experiences, focusing on how they develop their abilities to initiate actions and topics and to actively engage as recipients of their host-family members’ talk. The findings suggest that despite the relatively short period of time, and the learners’ limited proficiency, the host-family setting affords chances to develop and practice interactional skills that learners otherwise would not have the opportunity to practice.

Language Partner Interaction: Conversation or Interview?

Language partner interaction during study-abroad is often considered to give students a chance to engage in conversation. However, in order to achieve specific learning goals, teachers will often assign tasks for learners to complete with their language partners, which often entails the use of handouts that pre-determine possible topics or questions. This can inadvertently constrain turn taking, transforming the interaction from a conversation where both learners and language partners initiate and respond, to an interview where the learner primarily initiates questions and the language partners answer. This study focuses on the 6-week Rice in Country study abroad program and focuses on how learner orientation to the handout changes the teacher’s task-as-workplan to a more constrained task-in-process where learners focus on an end-goal of obtaining specific information rather than an end-goal of having an open conversation.
Assessing Interactional Competence: The Role of Intersubjectivity in a Paired-Speaking Assessment Task (with Katharina Kley)

Language assessments, even those that focus on Interactional Competence (IC), often focus on discrete features and resources that are utilized as part of the assessment task completion, but do not take into account the achievement, maintenance, and restoration of mutual understanding, or *intersubjectivity*. In other words, examiners, raters, and examinees often orient to the production of ratable speech, while in mundane conversation (which the assessment tasks are meant to reflect), intersubjectivity is often the overarching goal. This project, focusing on intermediate learners of German, explores ways in which intersubjectivity can be taken into account in the task- and rubric-design of language assessments, and the challenges that the incorporation of intersubjectivity into the constructs of IC in assessment pose for (re)designing and (re)validating speaking tests at the language program level.