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Research Article

The role of Communicative Interactions in Language Learning Tasks among Iranian Elementary EFL Learners

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Abstract

Communication happens when one person sends a message to another person either verbally or non-verbally and interaction happens when two people, for example an adult and a child respond to one another, a two-way communication. This paper looks into learner-learner interactions of low proficiency level learners using a mark-the differences and similarities task in an EFL context in a language institute in Kish Island in Iran. The learners were asked to practice with several sets of similar mark-the-differences tasks and the analysis focuses on the observable changes from the first to the last repetition. After the task performances were recorded, the learners were invited to watch their first and last performances and comment on the changes they noticed in an interview. Both the analysis of their dialogues performing the tasks and their reflections clearly show that learner-learner interactions with this age group at a very low level of competence can bring various benefits and thus primary language teachers could consider introducing similar communication tasks with learners with some confidence.

Key words: Communication, verbal interaction, non-verbal interaction, learner-learner interaction, competence.

1-Introduction

Recent explorations in task-based pedagogy have pointed out that learning outcome is the result of a fairly unpredictable interaction between the learner, the task, and the task situation. From the teacher's perspective, then, achievement of success depends largely on the degree to which teacher intention and learner interpretations of a given task converge. Language learning tasks have been explored with adult language learners but studies with learners have been scarce even though learning English has seen a dramatic expansion to the primary sector in many contexts around the world (Cameron, 2003). This study attempts to look into the learner's ability to interact with each other in English as a foreign language at a very basic level of competence, using a popular communication task, 'mark the differences and similarities task'. A series of repeated performances with the same type of task is explored to find out what gains this type of task repetition may bring. The study was motivated by the observation in many primary school contexts that the majority of language practices that learners receive tend to be centered on pattern practice, drilling and memorizing prefabricated expressions rather than experimenting with fluency tasks to express their own meanings in a less restricted manner. Teachers often feel that learners at a low level of competence are generally unable to handle communication tasks and benefit from them in any way.

Task demands can focus attention on specific concepts required for expression in the second language (L2) and prompt effort to grammaticize them in ways that the L2 formally encodes them, with consequences for improvements in accuracy of production. Tasks encourage learners to communicate with each other in real time. Due to the immediate pressures of spontaneous communication in tasks, learners have to simultaneously focus on both form and meaning. Since humans' processing capacity is limited (Anderson, 1995) and meaning is prioritized over form (Van Patten, 1990), manipulating learners' attention to focus on linguistic forms has become a key priority in research. Repetition is a task performance condition that can manipulate learners' attention through freeing up processing resource capacities. When they have the chance to repeat a task, learners can shift their attention to produce more complex grammar, more appropriate vocabulary, and they can generally organize and optimize their language resources more effectively. When learners are exposed to interactive tasks, they can rely on their previous performances of the same task to a limited extent only since their interlocutor's contributions will always bring some novelty to the joint interaction. Interactive task solutions are co-constructed and speakers need to satisfy their interlocutors' needs in addition to monitoring their own performance.

Some studies with adult learners have explored the effects of repeating interactive tasks (Plough and Gass, 1993; Lynch and Maclean, 2000, 2001). Plough and Gass (1993) conducted a

study using two tasks, a type of mark-the-differences task and a discussion task and found that students who repeated them used more confirmation checks to negotiate meaning with each other. Lynch and Maclean (2001) conducted a study which incorporated the repetition of a complex poster carousel task. This study involved mature adults learners of English in a medical ESP class. The students had to prepare a poster, display it and act as hosts answering questions of fellow students about it. The repetition of the tasks involved the hosts of the posters in explaining their messages to different people with different questions. Lynch and Maclean found that after six repetitions their students' language improved in many ways. All students produced more fluent and more accurate language, they all improved their phonology and vocabulary (both access and selection) and many of them improved their syntax, too. The subjects' ability to reflect on the changes was related to their proficiency level in English. The higher proficiency learners were better able to reflect on the changes brought about by the repetition of the task. With beginner-level students learning Spanish, two studies by Platt and Brooks (1994) and Brooks et al. (1997) showed that task repetition even at lower levels of competence led to students being able to gain better control of the tasks by using less L1 and less overt statements of self-regulation.

One important aspect of interactions in tasks is the essential need to collaborate effectively with a partner and this requires an appreciation of the partner's needs. Learners' overall ability to take their partner's needs in learner-learner interactions grows with. Research in L1 development indicates that different age groups learn to cope with demands needed for peer-peer interactions gradually as they mature (Meadows, 1998; Woods, 1998; Anderson and Lynch, 1988). Young learners often rely on adults to manage conversations for them. In the absence of the adult partner, when they are communicating with other learners, they show weaknesses both as speakers and as listeners. As speakers they have difficulty in constructing unambiguous messages and as listeners they can't judge the adequacy of incoming messages. The ability to take full responsibility for ones' own utterances as well as understanding partners' utterances are skills gradually increasing with age. All these developmental findings influence interaction in second or foreign languages and research in child second language learning clearly reflect these developmental influences. Studies involving child subjects working in pairs with other learners or with adults have been carried out in different contexts (Oliver, 1988, 2000, 2002; Mackey et al., 2003; Ellis, 1985) and these studies have investigated various interactional processes, such as giving and utilizing feedback, question formation and meaning negotiation. The results indicate that learners benefit from interacting with both peers and adults and with both NS and NNS interlocutors but both learner age and interlocutor type are important variables. Mackey and Silver claim that SLA research finding should not be generalized to learners without adequate empirical evidence. However, little is known about learner-learner interactions of different age

groups especially in EFL contexts, that is, what learners can cope with and benefit from. This study aims to explore EFL learner's learner-learner interaction using a mark-the differences and similarities task. Thus, this paper is mainly aimed at identifying what benefits the repetition brings, if any and whether the learners are aware of these benefits.

2-Method and Participants

The learners were selected from beginner levels, with almost low level of proficiency in a language institute named Sorinet language department in Kish Island, Iran. Based on the placement test administered after the registration in the mentioned institute, those students with lowest language proficiency were randomly chosen for the purpose of study. As mentioned, the sample was chosen randomly among a population who has learned English as a foreign language in a traditional teaching context, that is, English classes closely following the course book, emphasizing the grammar, rehearsal of set dialogues and memorizing through rote learning.

These learners had never seen or used interactive tasks in their English lessons before and they never had the opportunity to use their English spontaneously without preparation or rehearsal.

3-Data Collection and analysis

For each recording a different version of the 'mark-the differences and similarities task' was used. The task is clearly meaning-focused, conforming to Skehan's (1998) definition. According to this definition, in tasks meaning is primary and there is always some communication problem to solve. Tasks also mirror comparable real-world activities and task completion has priority over other performance outcomes. In the mark-the differences and similarities tasks, each picture represents a scene of a playground which is consisted of different objects, people doing thing, animals, etc.

For each recording a variation from set to set was achieved by a random organization of the content items within the same scenes. The following types of differences were used:

- Type 1: In picture A, a particular item was present but it was missing in picture B.
- Type 2: The number of a particular item in picture A was different from B.
- Type 3: A particular item in picture A was replaced by something else in picture B, or the same person was doing something different in each picture.

The learners were told that the researcher is interested in how the tasks would work with learners who are learning English. It was clearly stated that their performances and opinions were only available to the researcher and they were not going to count towards their assessment at final. An informal briefing session was organized to show a sample set of the task to the learners but no advice was given to them as to how to manage the tasks, how to help each other or what the best strategies would be to locate the differences. They were invited to do the task in their mother tongue in order for them to familiarize themselves with the task and get a feel for how it works. Then they were recorded three times in English over a period of three weeks.

The recordings took place in a small empty classroom in the institute but outside the learners' English classes with only the researcher in the room, who needed to get to know the learners prior to the study. The researcher did not interfere at all and the learners were in control as to when to stop the video-recorder.

The learner's performances were transcribed and changes between the different repetitions were analyzed, to see the most obvious change between the first and the last recording in English, and to evaluate the learners' fluency on the task. In this paper, however, we focused on another aspect of their interaction. It seems that the opportunity to repeat the task helps them to appreciate each other's needs better in view of the demands of the task. In particular we looked at peer assistance and their ability to pay attention to each other's utterances. Finally, we also discussed the extent to which they were aware of the benefits observable in their interactions.

Given that learners at this age (the participants were mainly from 12-14 age group) are still developing their skills as speaking partners, it was of particular interest to examine to what extent they appreciate their conversational partner's needs and whether their ability to do this is going to be affected by the task repetition. We also assumed that there is evidence of this in this experiment, that is, the weaker learners develop the target structure for describing people or things across the repetitions of the task with his/her friend's assistance.

The opportunities to repeat the mark-the-differences task led to changes in the way the learners paid attention to each other's utterances and to the demands of the task at hand. At the beginning they considered the mark-the-differences and similarities task to be an opportunity to display their own knowledge almost irrespective of what their partners had to say. By the end, it was obvious that their interpretation had moved on from 'an individual task' to 'a joint game' and they had learnt to take notice and build on each other's utterances.

One basic characteristic feature of referential gap tasks, such as the mark-the differences and similarities task, is that all participants need to pay attention to what their partners are saying

because it is only by building up joint information that they can find and keep tally of the differences.

After recording the tasks, the learners were invited together for an interview with the researcher to talk about the tasks and the benefits of repetition as they perceived them. The learners watched their first and last performances and commented on the differences they noticed. They were asked if they feel more confident and relaxed using their English, if they can explain their messages better and if they have learnt from each other's ways of speaking, and if they have learnt new thing like new words. They had noticed their initial lack of fluency and general hesitation. Their comments showed that in the first performance they were more concerned with their own utterances and they were saying what they could rather than paying attention to each other.

Next, they explained why they felt they were struggling at the beginning. They said that the difficulty lay in their lack of familiarity with the task. The other reason that they mentioned was the lack of words needed to describe items in the pictures. Their concern with vocabulary was clearly evident in the performances in that many of their attempts to assist each other described earlier were related to vocabulary. This concern was clearly articulated in their reflections too.

Their comments indicated their growing awareness to pay attention to what the partner was saying in order to meet the challenges of the task. The learners clearly enjoyed the task and seeing the improvements between the performances gave them a real sense of satisfaction.

They enjoyed the experience of speaking English in a spontaneous manner with each other, managed to complete the task by the last repetition more fluently. The task repetition clearly led to many gains for the learners. They assisted each other across the repetitions but in particular the more competent learner assisted the weaker one in many different ways. In addition, the learners improved their grasp of the task and could better appreciate what the task demands were. They learnt to pay attention and respond to each other more carefully. On the first occasion they handled the task as one that requires each speaker to simply display their knowledge of English irrespective of the partner's contributions and later they turned the task into a joint fast-moving game that they tackled with confidence. The interview indicated that they were able to see the benefits of the task repetition and were aware of many of the positive changes that occurred in their performances.

All this evidence suggests that using this kind of task repetition with communication tasks can work effectively with learners at low levels of proficiency. In addition, it may be the case that this kind of task repetition (i.e. practicing with the same task type) can provide a scaffold that learners can benefit from without or before the intervention from the teacher. Through a series of

task repetition these learners moved from less effective to more effective ways of handling both this gap task and each other as conversational partners. Interacting with a peer on repeated occasions can be a rich learning experience and working with the same partner over several repetitions means learners can grow more confidence. In classrooms this can be a fruitful way of introducing tasks: getting learners to practice with the same partner and then to think about what they did and why and how they improved.

It is of course not possible to claim that all the changes happened as a result of the task repetition exclusively. The task performances and the follow-up interview were recorded over a period of three weeks and even though the learners were not encouraged to do any preparation or consultation with anybody, it would have been unnatural for them not to mention their experiences to anyone and above all not to talk about it between them. It is quite likely that the learners talked about the tasks to their parents, friends, siblings or teachers. They may also have looked at their English textbooks, dictionaries or other sources to find words such as names of rooms or names of animals.

This study did not attempt to set up a direct cause and effect relationship between repetition and learning in an experimental manner because many of the variables were not controlled. Instead, the claim is that repetition offered regular opportunities and a vehicle for the learners to display their growing ability to interact with each other and control a specific type of task without any intervention from the teacher. Assisting each other promptly, paying attention to each other or realizing that they had to tighten the search for differences could not have been improved in any other way outside the task but by directly participating in the task on repeated occasions.

4-Conclusion

This study supports earlier research by suggesting that it is important to provide practice in task repetition. The analysis of the data illustrates that repetition of this kind can be beneficial at low levels of proficiency with learners, not just adults. These encouraging results may suggest that teachers with beginner-level child learners can be more confident that learner-learner interactions, at least for this age group, offer multiple benefits to learners and practicing with similar tasks is an effective way of encouraging these positive changes to take place. It is of course important to add that different age groups need different task types and younger learners are less likely to notice the demands of the task or the needs of the interlocutor.

There are naturally limitations to the tentative claims made in this paper. Limitations include the choice of one specific task and a specific teaching/learning and cultural context. Research with different tasks, more learners in different contexts and of different age groups would be

essential to begin to build up a picture about the processes that occur in learners' learner-learner interactions in language tasks.

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