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The effect of written languaging on learning the hypothetical conditional in English



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ABSTRACT

Recent research has shown that languaging (i.e., when learners use language to reflect on their language use) facilitates the learning of a second language (L2). Although languaging includes both speaking and writing (Swain, 2006), oral languaging has received the most attention to date. To fill this research gap, this study attempted to examine the effects of written languaging on L2 learning. Forty L2 learners were assigned to three groups: written languaging (+WL), no WL (−WL), and control. In Week 1, the pretest was completed by all groups. In Week 2, after reading a text on the target grammatical structure (i.e., the subjunctive past tense in English), the +WL group wrote about their understanding of the relevant rule (i.e., written languaging) and the −WL group worked on a grammar exercise related to this structure. An immediate posttest followed. A delayed posttest was administered one week later. Although both the ±WL groups outperformed the control group on all the posttests, only the +WL group scored significantly higher than the control group in the delayed production posttest, suggesting the facilitative effect of WL. These results are discussed with references to L2 research on languaging.

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1. Introduction and background of the study

1.1. Theoretical account of Swain's languaging

In daily life, we often find ourselves talking to ourselves or taking notes in an attempt to address complex problems, such as while reading and writing. Swain (2006, 2010) introduced the term “languaging” to refer to such language use in the domain of L2 education. Explaining it as “the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge ... through language” (p. 98), Swain (2006) claimed that it is the source of L2 learning. The concept of languaging originates with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of mind, which views language as an essential mediator of cognitive development. Although the word “languaging” may seem novel, its underlying concept has been investigated by researchers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) using terms such as “metatalk” (Storch, 2008; Swain, 1998), “verbalization” (M. Suzuki, 2008; Swain, 2000), “collaborative dialogue” (Swain & Lapkin, 1998), and “private speech” (Ohta, 2000).

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Pointing to the fact that these terms often ended up with people's misinterpretation, i.e., people often assume they refer only to speaking, Swain (2006) introduced an alternative term “*linguaging*” and stated that it refers to both speaking and writing. Moreover, she emphasized the importance of *linguaging* in language learning and defined it as “producing language in an attempt to understand—to problem-solve—to make meaning.” Although cognitive development is an internal process, this “*articulation of thinking*” (Storch, 2013, p. 16) externalizes the cognitive process, making it visible and creating a product that one can examine and reflect on.²

1.2. Oral *linguaging* and L2 learning

As the terms such as “*metatalk*” and “*verbalization*” suggest, *linguaging* investigated in the previous SLA studies so far has been mainly oral. Although oral *linguaging* was not necessarily the focus of all of the studies, their unanimous conclusion was that it facilitates L2 learning. For example, in Swain's (1998) study, learners who were instructed to engage in “*metatalk*” (i.e., talk about the language of the text they were reconstructing; p. 70) worked in pairs to reconstruct a text. An analysis of this talk revealed that the learners solved many of their linguistic problems by *metatalking* with each other. Based on this result, Swain argued that such *metatalk* contributed to L2 learning.

In addition, Storch (2008) used *metatalk* as a research tool to examine learners' levels of engagement. Although the levels of learners' understanding differed depending on their level of engagement (elaborate engagement led to better understanding than did limited engagement), it was found that engagement at both levels resulted in L2 learning in general. Storch explained that *metatalk* contributed to this result, supporting Swain's (1998) argument.

In Swain and Lapkin's (2007) study, learners were instructed to verbalize their linguistic problems while they worked on a reconstruction task. A close examination of the verbalizations revealed that this process facilitated learners' comprehension. For example, after verbalizing her problem, one student found an answer, exclaiming, “Oh, I get it now!” The researchers concluded that using language to reflect on primary language use has a positive impact on L2 learning.

Including the studies reviewed above, *linguaging* examined has been mainly collaborative in nature. More recent studies have examined individual or self *linguaging*, although many SLA researchers examine the role of private speech or self-explanatory speech in language learning (see Lantolf & Thorne, 2006 for a review). For instance, in a pilot study to Swain, Lapkin, Knouzi, W. Suzuki, and Brooks (2009), focusing on the process and product of *linguaging*, Lapkin, Swain, and Knouzi (2008) examined the impact of individual *linguaging* on learning a grammatical concept. Inspired by Negueruela's (2008) study,³ which reported the students' learning through verbalization of concept-based instruction, the researchers developed an explanatory text on the concept of voice in French. Six pilot students were instructed to read the text aloud and explain the concept, which Lapkin et al. referred to as “a type of *linguaging*” (p. 229). The examination of the pre- and posttests revealed uneven but clear evidence of learning in the posttests. Building on this pilot study, Swain et al. (2009) further examined the impact of *linguaging* on learning the same concept. Nine university students were instructed to read cards on the concept and to explain it orally. Despite individual differences in achievement as measured by pre- and posttest results, all participants reached a better understanding of the target concept.⁴ Based on this result, the researchers emphasized the importance of encouraging learners to consciously reflect on their primary output with their secondary language, namely, *linguaging*. These findings provide evidence that *linguaging* can contribute to L2 learning.

1.3. Written *linguaging*: theory and empirical studies

As terms such as *metatalk*, collaborative dialogue, and *verbalization* imply, the types of *linguaging* examined to date have primarily been oral. However, given that *linguaging* includes not only speaking but also writing (Swain, 2006), written *linguaging* (WL) should have a comparable effect to that of oral *linguaging* (OL). Following the interpretation of *linguaging* in previous OL research (e.g., Lapkin et al., 2008; Swain et al., 2009), WL in the current study is defined as learners' self-explaining of the target grammar rule in writing. Moreover, from the writing-to-learn perspective (Manchón, 2011), writing can be “a tool for language learning” (p. 69), fostering “a type of linguistic processing with potential learning effects” (p. 70). Nonetheless, only a few studies have focused on the role of WL in L2 learning. Some of these studies have been conducted by authors and his colleagues (e.g., W. Suzuki, 2009, 2012; W. Suzuki & Itagaki, 2007, 2009). For example, W. Suzuki (2012) examined the effects of WL about corrections of L2 writing. Japanese-speaking learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) were encouraged to engage in WL in their first language while they examined the direct corrections

² Although we use a term *linguaging* proposed by Swain (2006, 2010) in the current study, we acknowledge *translanguaging* (Garcia, 2009; Messina Dahlberg & Bagga-Gupta, 2013) in the large and growing body of literature in the Language Sciences. We believe that both Swain's *linguaging* and Garcia's *translanguaging* share common ground in that first language is utilized as a mediating tool of mind and it serves an important role in language learning. Further discussion is beyond the scope of this article.

³ Negueruela (2008) instructed participants to perform *linguaging* tasks (i.e., self-explaining the concept taught in the class) designed for homework six times over 16 weeks in consideration of freeing them from time constraints and providing them with private quality of *linguaging*. The examination of the *linguaging* episodes tape-recorded by the participants revealed marked improvement at the end of the course in their production (especially written production) of the formal features associated with target concepts.

⁴ This result is consistent with the findings by Ohta (2000), who reported that private speech is a source of language learning.

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