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# Audio glossing during information-gap activities: The effect on learner output



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## ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study of novice-level learners of French completing information-gap activities, contrasting the language produced by participants with access to audio glosses to that produced by those with no such access. Results suggest multiple benefits from the audio glosses. Quantitative benefits were demonstrated in a higher total percentage of targeted vocabulary items produced by those with access to the audio glosses compared to those without. Participants with glosses also introduced the noun into the conversation in French to a greater extent than those without, who frequently requested forms from their interlocutors in English. Close examination of language forms produced by the learners also indicated greater accuracy of recall of the targeted nouns. Learners with access to the glosses avoided coining new forms, using the glosses to retrieve lexical items when necessary. Learner comments concerning their abilities in French were also less negative from participants in the gloss context. Overall, the results of the study show that participants with access to the audio files produced more of the targeted vocabulary more accurately, with less disruption to communication. In addition, they appeared to benefit from an improved self-image of their ability in French throughout the activity.

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## 1. Introduction

A common complaint of many foreign language teachers is that their learners revert frequently to their first language (L1) when unable to retrieve necessary vocabulary items or otherwise express their meaning in the second language (L2). This appears particularly problematic during pair/group work, when learners are engaged in communication yet lack the vocabulary necessary to fully express their ideas. In the midst of communicative activities, students frequently appeal to one another for help. When the interlocutor is able to provide the help (often a lexical item), the conversation, and thus the task, proceeds without much delay. However, when the requested help cannot be provided, or when an incorrect form is offered, the task is interrupted. Learners may become discouraged, and further learning is potentially disrupted. The study presented here was designed to examine the effect of audio glosses on learners' ability to produce targeted vocabulary accurately during interactive tasks, reducing learners' needs to resort to their partners and/or the L1 for help when they face retrieval difficulties.

In her seminal article, [Garrett \(1991\)](#) asked us to address research questions on how technology can serve language learners with the query: *... what kind of software, integrated how into what kind of syllabus, at what level of language learning, for what kind of language learners, is likely to be effective for what specific learning purposes?* (p. 75, italics hers) In a return to this

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topic in 2009, Garrett noted that she would replace the word “software” in the quote above with the term “technology-based learning activities” (Garrett, 2009, p. 721), but that otherwise the question still holds. In both articles, she argues that we should not be attempting to determine *whether* technology is effective, but *how* it can be used effectively. The current study is therefore an attempt to respond to Garrett’s call to action, showing an effective use of technology amongst beginning-level learners as they complete interactive speaking tasks. Despite the prevalence of laptop computers, tablets and smartphones in our classrooms, very little research has been conducted on the applications of technology (especially hypermedia platforms) during speaking, and this is a gap that must be addressed.

## 2. Literature review

The following literature review reports relevant research from three fields of study: interactive tasks and the effect of communicative output on second language learning in general; the importance of communicative practice on L2 vocabulary acquisition/retention; and L2 glossing, particularly as it pertains to vocabulary acquisition/retention.

### 2.1. Interactive tasks and second language learning

For the past thirty years, researchers such as Gass, Varonis, Long, and Swain have argued for the incorporation of interactive tasks in the second language classroom, positing that it is output, not input, that leads to second language acquisition. Varonis and Gass (1985) focused in particular on times when learners lacked vocabulary items necessary to continue the task, and on the negotiation that followed. Their study showed positive results for vocabulary acquisition when learners were pushed to negotiate meaning and thus to arrive at a mutual understanding in order to complete their task. Extensive studies followed (Bueno Alastuey, 2012; Duff, 1986; Pica, 2005; Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993; Nakahama, Tyler, & van Lier, 2001; Smith, 2003; Storch, 2002; among others), and compared different task types and the effect of these task types on vocabulary acquisition/language learning. While the results of these studies at times appeared contradictory, they did generally show a positive effect for pair/group work. Observed contradictions could often be explained in terms of task type or the importance of the targeted vocabulary for task completion, as well as by individual learner factors. Thus, while Duff (1986) and Nakahama et al. (2001) argued that one-way tasks were equally effective in promoting negotiation of meaning between interlocutors as two-way tasks, Pica et al. (1993) found the greatest amount of negotiation during a jigsaw task which required both participants to take equal turns. Smith (2003) found that learners negotiated targeted vocabulary on a decision-making task more often than on a jigsaw task, and argued that the saliency of the vocabulary needed for the former likely led to more negotiation. Storch (2002), in contrast, attributed a role to learner dynamics, arguing that the best balanced dyads saw the most equal language acquisition during post-testing. Pica (2005) argued for the use of information gap tasks in particular, noting that “[i]n order to reach the precise outcomes that information gap tasks require, participants must make sure the information they exchange is both accurate and understood” (p. 341).

Based on the results of these and other studies, researchers such as Long (1996), Pica (2005) and Swain (2000) posit that output is essential in second language acquisition (SLA), as it is during language production that learners notice gaps in their interlanguage systems and are forced to make changes – thus acquiring new vocabulary, perfecting phonology, adding morphological inflections, revising syntax, and so on. These researchers argue that learners should be engaged in maximal opportunities for output (a term that Swain has since replaced with ‘collaborative dialogue’), entailing deep cognitive functioning that fosters L2 development to a greater extent than that achieved through comprehension (input) alone (Swain, 2000, p. 99). At the same time, Bueno Alastuey (2012) noted that learners participating in a synchronous computer-mediated task engaged in a great deal of negotiation, but that those who shared the same L1 negotiated less frequently than those with different L1s. Common triggers for negotiation in Bueno Alastuey’s study included lexicon and pronunciation, in addition to morphosyntax. Notable for the current study, however, is the fact that learners who share the same L1 (typical of the foreign language classroom) may not negotiate meaning even if they are using incorrect lexical items or pronunciations. Approximate understanding may be reached amongst learners sharing a similar L1, and may be deemed good enough.

As extensive as the preceding research is on the contribution of interactive tasks to language acquisition, it completely lacks an examination of vocabulary that is supposedly already known to students. It must be recognized, however, that a small corpus on common lexicon (much of it recently learned) makes up the lion’s share of language exchanged when beginning-level students are engaged in classroom tasks. Previous studies have looked at the extent to which students can acquire new vocabulary through negotiation of meaning while participating in pair and group work. To date, however, no research has focused on the extent to which learners’ lack of ability to recall shared vocabulary prevents the successful completion of such tasks, or whether glosses provided to learners during interactive tasks could alleviate some instances of mutual incomprehension or provide models of accurate lexicon or pronunciation, thus allowing for reinforcement of knowledge.

### 2.2. L2 vocabulary acquisition/retention and communicative language practice

Where acquisition and retention of L2 vocabulary are concerned, Nation (2001) attributes an important role to communicative activities, noting that during such activities learners can practice the vocabulary that they have learned from decontextualized lists:

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