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Children working it out together: A comparison of younger and older learners collaborating in task based interaction



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ABSTRACT

This paper describes peer interaction among children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) in primary schools. Through linguistic analysis it provides an exploratory examination of the nature of their collaborations, how they work together and the ways they interact as they complete classroom task pair work. 42 children from two junior and two senior classes of intermediate level English from four EAL reception classrooms participated. Data comprised recordings and transcriptions of the interactions of 11 pairs of younger (5–8 years) and 10 pairs of older (9–12 years) children as they completed five tasks over two weeks.

An analysis of the language used demonstrated variation in: (a) the way the children worked socially, enjoyment during task work, cooperating and achieving reciprocity, and how they resolved conflict when it occurred; (b) their task management and on- and off-task talk; (c) the language they used for learning, demonstrating their cognitive involvement, and; (d) their attention to content and linguistic aspects of the task. Differences were also observed to occur according to the age of the learners. Together the results from this study suggest the need to consider task based interaction beyond simply the linguistic and operational levels alone.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Benefits of communicative peer interaction

Recent research on peer interaction and second language (L2) acquisition has had as its focus how learners use and work with the target language. This body of research, most of which has been conducted with adult L2 learners, explores interaction based on the premise that it facilitates acquisition because it both promotes comprehension and draws learners' attention to connections between language form and meaning. It has been found that having to communicate clearly with one another can push learners to produce more complex, appropriate and accurate language forms and in this way promotes language learning (Gass, 1997; Long, 1996; Mackey, 2007). On this basis linguistic analyses that document interactional modifications, peer feedback and language related episodes (LREs) (Swain & Lapkin, 2002) in learner language production

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have all been effectively used to explore the production and language acquisition that occur when learners work together (Storch, 2002; for review, see; Oliver & Philp, 2014; Philp, Adams, & Iwashita, 2013).

Further, the findings of research conducted over the past two decades in this field suggest that the benefits of interaction also hold true for children just as they do for adults (although age differences have been noted – see Oliver, 2000, 2009; Mackey, Oliver, & Leeman, 2003). Specifically, the series of studies conducted by Oliver show that children use similar interactive strategies as adults do, though proportional differences are noted with regard to use (Oliver, 1998, 2000, 2002) and according to the quality of what they say (e.g., truth and politeness can vary with age) (Oliver, 2000, 2009). Even so, previous findings suggest that interacting with peers can be a particularly motivating context for practice and meaningful second language (L2) use for child learners (Bigelow & King, 2016; Butler & Zeng, 2014, 2015; Mackey, Kaganas, & Oliver, 2007; Mackey, Oliver, & Philp, 2006; Mackey et al., 2003; Oliver, 1995, 2000; Pinter, 2007). This is also the linguistic space where child peers can provide each other with the type of input and feedback that is purported to be facilitative of L2 learning (Oliver, 2002, 2009; Philp & Duchesne, 2008; Wong-Fillmore, 1976).

1.2. Social interaction

Despite the apparent utility of child peer interaction, these are by no means blanket effects and other aspects of interaction, including affiliation and social goals, may mediate its potential for learning (Philp & Duchesne, 2008; Philp, 2016; Tognini, Oliver, & Philp, 2010). For example, Hay, Payne and Chadwick (2004) suggest that the degree of emotional regulation, social understanding, and executive function all influence children's dyadic interactions. Other work on cooperative learning in the first language (L1) context suggests that the group dynamics also influence the effectiveness of interaction (Gillies, 2007). However, such studies tend to examine cognitive learning outcomes rather than language-related ones. Even so the results are consistent with the small amount of L2 research undertaken in this area where it has been found for children that the social and linguistic benefits of interaction appear to be interdependent (Bigelow & King, 2016; Toohey, 2000; Wray, 1999). That is, the potential of children's L2 peer interaction for language development is contingent on underlying social goals and on the relationships between the children, which in turn is situated in their language. Some even suggest that for younger children social goals can be more important than academic goals (Philp & Duchesne, 2008). Therefore, it is possible that it is not only the language the child L2 learners use in their task-based interactions, but the way that they relate to each other that may promote or hinder language learning. The role of peers has been widely investigated from the point of view of cognitive, social and language learning benefits in the L1 context. For example, Forman and Cazden (1985) found a positive correlation between learning and the level of social engagement with a partner.

In the L1 context it has been found that a multitude of features contribute to the success of interaction, although it is also noted that effectiveness varies greatly (Hogan & Tudge, 1999). For example, two social features found to influence successful L1 interaction are mutuality and equality (Damon & Phelps, 1989; see also Storch, 2002 for similar findings for adult L2 interaction). Mutuality of peers is described as having discourse that is "extensive, intimate and 'connected'" (Damon & Phelps, 1989:10). Equality refers to the equal-ness (or not) of the relationship, including the distribution of power. It is reflected in the ways children take direction from one another, while mutuality is reflected in how they work together in ways that allow them to try out or explore new ideas. The two aspects are also represented by how peers contest, resist or accept one another's solutions or corrections, and perhaps even how new conceptions of language form, meaning and use are fostered in their interactions. These two features encompass the power of the social context of the interaction and are demonstrated in the way children, through their language, can regulate their social interaction. The peer collaboration that ensues is even seen in very young children's play, well before it appears in more formal ways (Forman, 1992). There is, however, a dearth of research on how these features manifest in the interactions of child L2 learners.

Not all peer interaction in the L1 context is positive and children working together can also have a negative influence on one another's learning. Kutnick and Kington (2005), for instance, found that when children work together social and task goals may not always align and this can have a negative effect on outcomes. They also found gender differences in this regard with female friendship pairings leading to higher performance and male pairings achieving lower performance on a reasoning task. From the current available literature it is unclear whether the degree of social engagement with one's partner may affect, not only learning in a general sense, but also language learning for children working in an L2 context.

Related to social interaction are the level of active participation and the enjoyment of the learners when they do interact. Tognini (2008), for example, in a study of foreign language (i.e., L2) primary and high school classrooms in Australia, found many students saw peer interaction as a fun stress-free context in which to try things, make mistakes and work things out together, as seen in this primary school student's account of how she and her partner sort out difficulties in communication:

When I'm with A and I just look at her funny, I just go (*she makes a faces to signal incomprehension and everyone laughs*) and she goes, like she doesn't see and she says it really slowly and does that hand action, *non lo so*. (p.282)

Clearly, the degree of mutuality and common purpose can impact on this participation and enjoyment. These social dimensions of L2 interaction amongst young learners are examined in the current study.

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