Promoting speaking proficiency and willingness to communicate in Turkish young learners of English through asynchronous computer-mediated practice

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This study investigated whether the provision of out-of-class speaking practice to young learners of English could contribute to improving speaking proficiency grades, and have a positive impact on children's willingness to communicate. Two intact classes of Grade 3 Turkish learners participated. Recorded communicative exercises provided asynchronous speaking practice homework with the classroom teacher as the children's interlocutor, while the control group received traditional paper-based exercises. The content of materials used in both groups was based on the class syllabus.

A comparison of the speaking test scores of the control and experimental groups revealed that, over a four-month period, the use of the interactive recordings contributed to a significant improvement in the children's assessed oral performance. The implementation was particularly successful in raising the speaking test scores of children who had initially received lower scores. A subsequent ANOVA analysis revealed that the experimental group demonstrated an improvement in their ability to respond confidently with minimal pauses and hesitations, although the length of responses did not change significantly. The integration of such computer-mediated activities for homework speaking practice is potentially particularly useful in contexts where parents lack sufficient English skills to support children with their English-language homework tasks.

1. Introduction

The provision of opportunities to communicate in the classroom constitutes one of the central tenets of communicative language teaching (CLT) and is considered a core principle of contemporary approaches to instructed language learning (Ellis, 2014). Despite opportunities for meaningful oral practice in teaching materials, most teachers have experienced their careful planning come to little fruition with students appearing unwilling to engage in target language communication within the classroom context. While reasons underlying classroom target language avoidance are various, feelings of anxiety and inadequacy appear to be contributory factors (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Levine, 2003; Tatar, 2005). Previous work also suggests that learners may consider using a foreign language with a person whose L1 they share to be unnatural (Çetinkaya, 2005; MacIntyre, Burnes, & Jessome, 2011). Alternatively, the time assigned to in-class communicative activities may

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ultimately not be commensurate with the importance oral communication in the CLT classroom. Class size and the pressure to fulfil curriculum requirements and ensure adequate exam preparation often conspire against the inclusion of more communicative practice (Ho, 2003; Sun, 2012; TEPAV, 2013; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004).

Evidence suggests that out-of-class language learning experiences may, to varying degrees, compensate for these limitations in the case of motivated learners. Indeed, learners who attain higher achievement levels appear to capitalize on out-of-class language learning opportunities (Inozu, Sahinkarakas, & Yumru, 2010; Lai, Zhu, & Gong, 2015; Sundqvist, 2011). The characteristics of out-of-class learning vary considerably depending on such variables as location, level of formality, pedagogical approach and locus of control (Benson, 2011). While some out-of-class learning may be self-directed and prioritise entertainment value or non-language outcomes, out-of-class learning may also be linked to coursework and have a formal instructional element.

This study investigates an out-of-class learning opportunity in a self-managed, private, low-anxiety environment (the students' home), where the locus of control is shared between the learner, the parent(s) and the teacher. It reflects a semi-formal learning context in that the material is linked to the curriculum and is intended to facilitate the practice of language items from the syllabus. Designed to supplement classroom instruction, the approach represents a form of blended learning.

Traditional paper-based homework materials typically reinforce writing, reading and listening skills but do not enable students speaking practice beyond the classroom. This study employs recorded spoken texts as a learning resource which enables an extension of the customary preserve for instructed speaking practice from the classroom to alternative settings (Ibarz & Webb, 2007; Webb, 2006), including the home. Recordings provide durable evidence of a learner's speaking ability and pronunciation, which can be used to track the development of oral skills. As a collateral benefit, they also provide additional listening practice.

Whilst this form of speaking exercise is not synchronous and thus does not reproduce the conditions of real-time communication, asynchronous communication is a feature of authentic communication in the form of telephone or social media voice messages.

Comparisons of the pedagogical benefit of synchronous and asynchronous communication are scant. In Satar and Özdener's (2008) study, lower level learners appeared to benefit more from the time delay inherent in (written) text-chatting, as opposed to synchronous oral chatting using a computer-mediated communication (CMC) application, owing to the opportunities for rehearsal and planning inherent in this medium. Synchronous computer-mediated speaking tasks are likely better suited to learners of higher proficiency levels due to the higher cognitive load involved in real-time communication. In the case of young learners, asynchronous speaking tasks performed within the home afford children exposure to the language and a motive to use it within their home environment. This form of homework also provides the possibility for parental support (or involvement) with homework in homes where parents have little or no English, as the recordings (rather than family members) provide spoken models of target language.

This study examines the use of technology to support the development of English speaking skills of Grade 3 children at a private primary school in Turkey through asynchronous audio-visual speaking activities (A/Vs). It measures oral proficiency development by comparing learners' speaking assessment grades and traces changes in children's willingness to communicate (WTC) during the intervention period. Previous studies on WTC have tended to focus on teenage or adult learners and, to our knowledge, no studies have previously examined young children's WTC in an L2. Furthermore, as noted in Lin (2014), young learners have been largely neglected in research on computer-mediated foreign language acquisition.

2. Background

2.1. Willingness to communicate

Derived from the notion of 'unwillingness to communicate' and originally examined from the perspective of communication in the L1 (Burgoon, 1976), the application of the WTC concept to L2 communication is attributed to the work of MacIntyre and associates, who viewed WTC as the "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998, p.547). The authors argue that a broader range of variables affect one's readiness to communicate in an L2 than in an L1, some of which (such as socio-political factors colouring intergroup perceptions) are immaterial to L1 communication.

Conceptualized as a series of six interrelated layers, the WTC construct developed by MacIntyre et al. (1998) viewed an individual's propensity to enter into communication as a state sensitive to interpersonal, psychological and contextual factors.

The apex of the pyramid (see Fig. 1) constitutes the actual communicative behaviour in the L2. Layer 2 embodies an individual's behavioural intention to communicate, embodied as WTC. This intention is reliant on variables in the preceding layer, which according to MacIntyre et al. (1998, p.54), constitute "the most immediate determinants of WTC", namely 'the desire to communicate with a specific person' and 'state communicative self-confidence'. Positive affiliation with the interlocutor (e.g., through familiarity, perceptions of status or social attractiveness) is considered an important motive in predicting WTC in the target language, together with the individual's perceived competence to communicate in specific situations, and low anxiety, (MacIntyre et al., 2011).

Layer 4 comprises motivational variables which, broadly speaking, represent the propensity to communicate (either as an individual or as a group member) with others, and an individual's overall self-confidence in using the L2. The base layers of the pyramid, layers 5 and 6, are viewed as more stable variables, which are more distant from the specific communicative