Effect of proficiency on Vietnamese EFL learners' engagement in peer interaction

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ABSTRACT

To expand previous interaction research that investigated only the impact of proficiency on occurrence of language related episodes or pair dynamics, this study explored the effect of proficiency on a range of cognitive, social and emotional features of interaction through the lens of engagement. Fifteen core EFL learners interacted with peers of higher and lower proficiency to complete picture sequencing tasks. The core learners' degree of engagement when interacting with the lower and the higher proficiency partners was compared. Results revealed that the core learners showed greater cognitive and social engagement and reported higher emotional engagement when interacting with higher proficiency partners. The results are discussed in terms of the role of proficiency pairing in fostering learner engagement in interaction.

1. Introduction

Peer interaction has recently received increased attention in second language (L2) research due to its prevalence in language classrooms and its facilitative role in L2 learning. Findings from previous research have suggested that peer interaction is an optimal L2 learning environment when learners engage in interactive feedback (Adams, 2007; Sato & Lyster, 2012), practice their language use (Mackey, 2012; Philp, Adams, & Iwashita, 2014), and co-construct L2 knowledge during interaction (Swain & Lapkin, 2002). However, numerous variables that impact the effectiveness of peer interaction at promoting L2 learning have been identified, of which proficiency has attracted much attention from both L2 instructors and researchers (see Philp et al., 2014; Sato & Ballinger, 2016 for recent reviews). Proficiency has been shown to affect learners' discussion of language form (i.e., language-related episodes or LREs) and their pair dynamics. To date, peer interaction research about proficiency has limited its investigation to these two aspects. Thus, to expand this line of research, the current study further investigated the effects of proficiency on cognitive, social and emotional aspects of peer interaction through the lens of learner engagement.

2. Literature review

2.1. Effects of proficiency on peer interaction

Previous peer interaction research has shown the effect of interlocutor proficiency on the occurrence of LREs during interaction. When interacting with same-level peers, low-proficiency learners tend to produce more instances of collaborative dialogue (Young & Tedick, 2016) and focus on lexical forms more frequently than grammatical forms (Leeser, 2004; Williams, 2001). Studies that have paired learners from diverse proficiency levels have shown that low-proficiency learners generate more LREs when working with

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higher-proficiency partners rather than with same-level peers (Kim & McDonough, 2008; Leeser, 2004; Storch & Aldosari, 2013). In addition, low-proficiency learners can be encouraged to engage in more LREs by giving them the role of information provider as opposed to information receiver (Dao & McDonough, 2017). In sum, interlocutor proficiency has been shown to affect the degree to which learners discuss language form and which forms they talk about. However, this body of research has focused predominantly on how interlocutor proficiency affects learners' cognitive orientation, specifically the extent to which they engage in LREs. Although LREs capture some cognitive processes during interaction, they do not measure other cognitive processes that may be relevant during task-based peer interaction, such as learners' discussion of task content.

Besides affecting learners' discussion of language forms, interlocutor proficiency has also been shown to impact the social relationship between learners during dyadic interaction. In mixed proficiency dyads, research has found that higher-proficiency partners may ignore the contributions of their lower proficiency peers (Swain, 1994, 1997;). Following Storch's framework for pair dynamics (Storch, 2002), researchers have qualitatively coded learners' patterns of interaction during mixed proficiency dyads in terms of mutuality and equality. These studies have shown that learners in mixed proficiency dyads are more likely to engage in non-collaborative and unequal interactions (Kim & McDonough, 2008; Sato, 2017; Storch & Aldosari, 2013; Watanabe & Swain, 2007). However, these studies focused on how pair dynamics impacted the occurrence of LREs, as opposed to more social aspects of peer interaction, such as seeking and providing assistance for task content and execution, encouraging the maintenance of interaction, and responding to a partner's ideas. Consequently, a more complete understanding of how proficiency differences impact learners' social relationships is needed.

In addition to cognitive and social effects linked to proficiency differences, previous research has also suggested that specific interlocutors may provoke certain negative or positive emotions, which may then impact the benefits of peer interaction for L2 learning (Sato & Lyster, 2007; Sheen, 2004; Swain, 2013; Yoshida, 2008). For example, in mixed proficiency dyads, higher-proficiency learners may get frustrated with their less-proficient peers, who may then adopt a more passive role in response to that frustration (Kowal & Swain, 1994). To date, very little research has examined whether interlocutor proficiency affects learners' emotions. Given that peer interaction is a cognitive, emotional and social phenomenon (Atkinson, 2010; Block, 2003; Swain, 2013), empirical research should also consider the potential impact of proficiency on learners' emotions.

To summarize, proficiency has been shown to impact peer interaction at cognitive, emotional, and social levels. However, this research has drawn largely on the commonly used constructs of LREs and collaborative pair dynamics to identify how interlocutor proficiency plays a role in peer interaction. To gain a broader perspective into the impact of interlocutor proficiency on learners' peer interaction, L2 research needs to explore additional constructs that can provide insight into more varied aspects of interaction. In light of this goal, recent peer interaction research has adopted the multidimensional construct of engagement to explore additional dimensions of peer interaction (Baralt, Gurzynski-Weiss, & Kim, 2016; Lambert, Philp, & Nakamura, 2017; Phung, 2017). The next section discusses models of engagement in L2 interaction.

2.2. Engagement in L2 interaction

Contemporary approaches to engagement have been heavily influenced by Svalberg's model of engagement with language (2009, 2012). She defined engagement with language as cognitive, affective and social states and/or processes in which language is treated both as an object and/or a means to communicate meaning. Cognitive engagement was defined as an individual's alertness, focused attention and active construction of knowledge, whereas affective engagement was associated with willingness to interact, purposefulness, and autonomy. Social engagement was defined in terms of supportiveness and interactiveness.

Although Svalberg proposed a comprehensive and pioneering model of learner engagement, only a few empirical studies have adopted her framework when analyzing peer interaction (e.g., Ahn, 2016; Baralt et al., 2016). One possible reason is that researchers have faced challenges when operationalizing the construct of engagement and differentiating among its cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. For instance, in their study about the effects of task complexity and task modality on learner engagement, Baralt et al. (2016) reduced and simplified the criteria used to identify types of engagement. Following from previous peer interaction research, they operationalized cognitive engagement in terms of noticing of interaction features and language (e.g., LREs). Social engagement was defined in terms of collaboration, mutual support and help, as seen previously in Storch's framework, while affective engagement was considered in terms of willingness to engage (e.g., eagerness or withdrawal). These dimensions of engagement were identified through an analysis of learners' interaction, chat logs, and questionnaires. Baralt et al.'s effort in reconceptualizing and simplifying the criteria for identifying engagement has revealed the challenges with applying Svalberg's model in L2 research.

Although not explicitly referring to Svalberg's model of engagement with language, Philp and Duchesne's (2016) model of task engagement also defines engagement as a multidimensional construct. They define engagement as "a state of heightened attention and involvement" (p.51) that manifests in four dimensions: cognitive, emotional, behavioral and social. Whereas cognitive engagement includes processes such as sustained attention, mental effort, and self-regulation strategies, emotional engagement refers to the expression of a variety of emotions such as enthusiasm, interest, enjoyment, disaffection, anxiety, frustration and boredom. Behavioral engagement is defined as keeping on task as evidenced by the quantity of on-task talk, while social engagement reflects the degree of reciprocity and mutuality between learners during task-based interaction.

Researchers have adopted Philp and Duchesne's model to explore how different task design and implementation factors impact peer interaction. For example, Lambert et al. (2017) compared learners' engagement when carrying out tasks with either learner-generated or teacher-generated content. They operationalized behavioral engagement as quantity of speech, while cognitive engagement included negotiation of meaning along with the production of elaborative clauses (e.g., ideas that were elaborated through justifications, explanations, and questioning). Social engagement was defined in terms of back channels. They found that there were