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The effect of learner–learner interactions on a multiple-choice discourse completion task

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effect of learner–learner interactions on a pragmatic task—a multiple-choice discourse completion task (MDCT). Twenty intermediate-level Chinese learners of English were asked to complete two isomorphic versions of an MDCT individually and in pairs. Afterwards, focus group interviews were conducted to investigate the participants' perceptions of the interactions when doing the pair work. The data collected included the participants' MDCT performance in individual work and pair work, the audio-taped learner–learner interactions, and the interview recordings. The MDCT results showed that the scores in pair work were significantly higher than those in individual work. The analysis of the learner–learner interactions revealed that the participants focused on *politeness*, *repair*, *interlocutor relationship*, *tone of voice*, *relevance*, *clarity* and *clarification*. Finally, the interview protocols indicated that the participants held positive attitudes towards the learner–learner interactions. This study closes by suggesting pedagogical implications to language teachers from a sociocultural perspective.

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, learner–learner interaction in pair or small group activities has become one of the most common practices used in communicative language teaching (Lightbown & Spada, 2001). The interaction hypothesis (Long, 1983, 1996), the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), the output hypothesis (Swain, 1985), and the notion of collaborative dialogue (Swain & Lapkin, 1998) have contributed strong theoretical support for learner–learner interactions. Empirically, studies to date have demonstrated that most learner–learner interactions have a positive effect on task performance in a variety of classroom activities targeting grammar and vocabulary (e.g., Baleghizadeh, 2010; Nassaji & Tian, 2010). During the interactions, learners engage in language-mediated cognitive activities by pooling their linguistic resources to solve the problems that they encounter, and therefore achieve a higher level of performance. However, this line of research has primarily focused on second/foreign language learners' linguistic performance, and overlooked another equally important language component (Bachman, 1990), *pragmatic performance*, pertaining to language use in context. One of the reasons may be attributed to "the relative novelty of interlanguage pragmatics as a research field" (Roever, 2006, p. 230). Therefore, to bridge this gap, the present study adopted a multiple-choice discourse completion task (MDCT)—one of six common instruments in second/foreign[1] language pragmatics

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(Hudson, Detmer, & Brown, 1995)—to examine whether and how learner–learner interactions would affect MDCT performance while pairs of Chinese learners of English were jointly carrying out such a pragmatic task.

2. Background

2.1. Interaction and second/foreign language learning

The role of interaction has frequently been addressed and is supported by a number of theoretical perspectives in second/foreign language research. One of these is the interaction hypothesis, in which two major claims have been advanced about the role of interaction in second/foreign language classrooms (Gass, 1997; Hatch, 1978; Long, 1983, 1996; Pica, 1994). The first claim is that comprehensible input provides one of the main sources of data for second/foreign language learning to take place. The term "comprehensible input" was introduced by Krashen (1985) and refers to language which is a step beyond learners' current state of linguistic knowledge ($i + 1$). Krashen argues that input at the same level as or way ahead of learners' current knowledge serves no purpose in second/foreign language learning. The second claim is that modified interaction which occurs in the process of negotiation for meaning makes input comprehensible to second/foreign language learners. The relationship between modified interaction, comprehensible input and second/foreign language learning can be summarized as (1) modified interaction that makes input comprehensible, (2) comprehensible input that leads to second/foreign language learning, and thus (3) modified interaction that promotes second/foreign language learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

While the interaction hypothesis takes a cognitive stance and focuses on the mind of the learner, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory contends that all individuals are socially situated and that cognitive development, including language development, is a result of interactions. He further argues that language development is most likely to occur when an individual interacts with a more knowledgeable person. Central to his argument is the notion of "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), which describes a metaphorical area between an individual's current knowledge and his/her potential achievable level. Through interactions, the more knowledgeable person provides 'scaffolding,' or guided support, to the individual to help him/her reach a higher level of competence within his/her ZPD. Drawing on the Vygotskyan theory, Donato (1994) argues that learner–learner interactions provide the same kind of guided support as experts provide novices. During interactions, learners are "at the same time individually novices and collectively experts" (p. 46), thereby co-constructing a scaffold for each other's performance. Such 'collective scaffolding' is analogous to Vygotsky's 'expert scaffolding' in the development of an individual learner's conceptual and linguistic competence.[2]

Another account which is related to the role of learner–learner interactions in second/foreign language learning is Swain's output hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 1998, 1999, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1995, 1998, to name just a few). Her earlier works challenged the interaction hypothesis by arguing that interactions not only provide learners with comprehensible input, but also give them "an opportunity to use the second language, that is, 'to output'" (Swain, 2000, p. 99). In her view, output has three major functions. The first function is 'noticing/triggering,' which occurs when learners notice a gap between what they want to say and what they can say. The second function is 'hypothesis-testing.' Through output, learners can test if the hypotheses that they formulate about the second/foreign language are accurate by observing and analyzing the feedback that they receive from interlocutors. The last function is metalinguistic, which means that output encourages learners to consciously reflect on their own language and pushes them to go beyond the current level of interlanguage (Swain, 2000).

Swain's later works, however, have shifted from an information-processing perspective to the sociocultural theory of mind. She claims that cognition and knowledge are "dialogically constructed" (Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002, p. 171), and that one type of dialogic interactions which draws the most attention is *collaborative dialogue*. In collaborative dialogue, learners jointly engage their mental processes to solve linguistic problems, co-construct language or knowledge about language, and promote the learning of the second/foreign language as a result of joint work (Swain, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1998).

2.2. Collaborative tasks in learner–learner interactions

Given the importance of interaction in second/foreign language learning, pedagogical tasks used to stimulate talk among learners have been reported in second/foreign language research. Nunan (1989) defines a communicative task as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language" (p. 10). While Nunan claims that such a task principally directs learners' attention to meaning, Swain and Lapkin (2001) extended his statement by arguing that when learners work collaboratively to complete a task, the interactions may also focus on form, as learners "attempt to express their intended meaning as accurately and as coherently as they are able" (p. 100).

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[2] In second/foreign language research, there is a distinction between *competence* and *performance*. According to Chomsky (1965), competence refers to the mental representation of linguistic rules in a person's internalized language system. On the other hand, performance refers to the comprehension and production of language. Second/foreign language research has been interested in how competence is developed. However, since competence is an internalized system, the learners' development can only be observed from how they perform a given task. In other words, second/foreign language research examines learners' performance, which can serve as evidence for what is going on in their head.