Analysing Collaborative Interaction In Learners' Task-Based Oral Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to investigate how learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) interacted during task completion using two different communication task types i.e. jigsaw and decision-making. The focus of investigations was the dynamics of learner interaction and the kind of oral discourse generated by the participants. The data for the study comprised transcribed recordings of learner interactions working on given tasks. They were qualitatively analyzed focusing on the social processing. Findings revealed that the participants attempted task completion collaboratively. The collaborative interaction was characterized by argumentative episodes. However, close examination showed that the participants engaged in more intensive argumentative negotiations which were highly collaborative during decision-making task completion than during task completion of the jigsaw task type. The results suggest that communication task types elicited collaborative interaction episodes with argumentative negotiations and these kinds of interactions are believed to be important particularly for learners at the tertiary level.

Keywords: oral discourse, collaborative interaction, argumentative episodes, communication tasks

INTRODUCTION

According to Gerlach (1994), learning occurs through interaction with others. Linguists and psychologists concur that interaction is crucial as a channel of exchanging knowledge that would promote both development and learning (Franco, 1996). In second language learning, interaction has always been regarded as important in a language classroom as it is believed that language is best learned and taught through interaction. Numerous studies have revealed the importance of interaction for second language learning (e.g. Long, 1983; Pica & Doughty, 1985). When learners interact, they engage in various activities such as repeating themselves, providing explanations and giving details in order to ensure their ideas and messages get across (Olsen & Kagan, 1992). These activities contribute to gains in second language or L2 acquisition.

The notion of interaction is very much related to Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis and Long's (1985) Interaction Hypothesis. The Output Hypothesis claims that when learners interact, they

produce language (output). Not only do they focus on the content of their output, they may be forced to focus on syntax and morphology of the target language as well. These activities provide opportunities for learners to modify their utterances so that they become grammatically accurate as well as sociolinguistically appropriate.

In the early version of the Interaction Hypothesis, emphasis is given to the importance of comprehensible input in language learning. It is argued that when input is comprehended, language acquisition is promoted. In its later version, Long (1996) recognizes the fact that negotiation for meaning may encourage learners to modify their output and he incorporates a role for 'pushed output' in L2 acquisition, as initially proposed by Swain (1985). He argues that second language acquisition is facilitated by conversational interaction. Conversational interaction provides learners with opportunities to receive the target language input, to produce output and make interactional modifications or adjustments during interaction.

Both the Interaction Hypothesis and Output Hypothesis support the use of communication tasks in the L2 classrooms in order to encourage learners to interact with one another. Studies have empirically shown that the use of tasks in language classrooms provides opportunities for learners to interact (Ellis, 2004; Kowal & Swain, 1997; Pica, Kanagy & Falodun, 1993; Swain, 1995, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 1995, 1998, 2000, 2001).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research in second language pedagogy advocates the use of tasks which require learners to produce output collaboratively (Kowal & Swain, 1997; Swain, 1995, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 1995, 1998, 2000, 2001) as learner collaboration in groups or pairs promote language learning. It is believed that the use of communication tasks in the L2 classroom would promote the kind of interaction which leads to language learning opportunities as shown in Swain and Lapkin's (1998) and Swain's (2001) studies. In their research, learners worked together completing a collaborative writing task. When they encountered linguistics problems, they tried to solve them through negotiation and scaffolding. The learners used their knowledge about the language for their output, "*allowing them to reflect on it, revise it and apply it*" (Swain, 2001). Such tasks encourage learners to notice gaps between what they want to say and what they can say, externalize their knowledge (i.e. talk about it) and participate actively. These activities provide learners with language learning opportunities.

To encourage learners to produce output collaboratively, tasks need to be structured such that for task completion, learners need to be involved in collaborative interactions whereby they are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building. In other words, the tasks need to be structured so that learners use the language to jointly address a problem, and use the language to respond to language problems that might arise in their utterances as they engage in task completion.

Since tasks are seen as tools which have an effect on interaction and the process of negotiation of meaning (Ellis, 2004; Pica et al., 1993), it is useful to examine the interaction of learners engaged in different communication task types and how different or similar they are in terms of the dynamics of learner-learner interaction. Thus, the investigation of this study focused on how the participants interacted during task completion (jigsaw and decision-making) and examined the kind of oral discourse they generated as these would enable the researcher to identify language learning opportunities when learners engage in task completion.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Eighteen EFL adult learners from a public university in Malaysia participated in the study. They were between 20 and 22 years old and shared the same L1 which was the Malay language. They all studied in religious secondary schools in various states in the country and they formally studied English as a subject for at least 11 years (6 years during primary education and 5 years during secondary education). For the study, the learners were places in groups of three.

Tasks

The task types used for the study were the jigsaw and the decision-making task types. The tasks were chosen due to their different characteristics and capacity to elicit learner interaction. The jigsaw task type was considered as the type that would encourage learners to interact and be involved in activities that would lead to successful L2 acquisition. On the other hand, due to its characteristics, the capacity of the decision-making task type in encouraging interaction that would lead to L2 acquisition was reduced.

Procedure

This study adopted a qualitative approach both in the collection and analysis of the data. Learner interactions were gathered and transcribed verbatim. Transcribed data were examined qualitatively. By using the qualitative approach in the collection and analysis of the data, the researcher was able to gain in-depth understanding on how the participants interacted when they engaged in the two task types and the kind of oral discourse they generated.

Data analysis

The analysis conducted focused on the social processing aspect. It was adapted from Kumpulainen and Wray's (2002) three-level parallel analysis. When analyzing learners' social processing in learner-learner interactions, the emphasis was on the nature of learners' collaboration – how they collaborated or their mode of collaborative work. The social processing provided an understanding on how the participants interacted as they engaged in task completion which included whether there was evidence of collaboration in their learner-learner interactions and the kind of oral discourse they generated. The different modes of collaboration included collaborative, tutoring, argumentative, individualistic, dominative, conflict and confusion modes.

RESULTS

How do EFL learners interact using different communication task types and what kind of oral discourse is generated?

Social processing
Collaborative interactions.

Episodes of collaborative interactions were evident as the participants jointly made meaning in order to understand the information and negotiated ideas. However, the kind of collaborative interactions generated differed between one task type and the other i.e. jigsaw and decision-making tasks. The learner interactions generated during jigsaw task completion exhibited close collaboration with some negotiation as the participants tried to make meaning together. As seen in Excerpt 1, Mohd provided an explanation to Jani about the position of the lake, island and hill in the picture. Jani repeatedly asked questions to ensure correct understanding. Both Mohd and Jani jointly investigated the information they had and made meaning together. This

is an episode of joint investigation and joint meaning-making to achieve mutual understanding of the materials, an evidence of collaboration.

Excerpt 1   Jigsaw (Joint Meaning-making)

Mohd:	On the middle and around the hill.
Jani:	Around the island has hill so there is a hill around the island?
Mohd:	Yes.
Jani:	Around the island *ke* around the lake?
Mohd:	Around the lake.
Jani:	*Seluruh tasik?*
Mohd:	Lake like this, lake hill island on the middle.
Jani:	*Ni* lake.
Mohd:	Like this.
Jani:	Ok, *ni* lake.
Mohd:	Middle.
Jani:	Where is the hill? (giggle) *Ni* hill.
Mohd:	Oh no lake, I think, er, ok, there is an island *sana* island like this.
Jani:	Ok, island.
Mohd:	Ok, this is island. Ok, the middle of lake.
Jani:	*Ni* lake?
Mohd:	Ha, lake.
Hartini:	Then the hill.
Mohd:	Ha, the hill a big tree.
Hartini:	*Tasik yang besar.*
Mohd:	*Sini tasik sini* lake.

<div align="right">*(J2/Brown/68-88)*</div>

A different kind of collaborative interaction could be observed when the participants engaged in the decision-making task completion. When the participants jointly made meaning, their learner interactions were exploratory and highly collaborative with evidence of intensive negotiation. They negotiated ideas and provided extended explanation in order to achieve mutual understanding. When compared to the jigsaw learner interactions, despite being collaborative when engaged in jigsaw task completion, their interactions were quite straight forward with some evidence of negotiation. Excerpt 2 illustrates the collaborative interaction generated by the participants when they completed the decision-making task. They negotiated their ideas and together they tried to make meaning. Hartini pointed out the picture which she thought showed air pollution. The rest of the participants in the team agreed after a short discussion. Then Mohd shared his opinion regarding the picture that showed water pollution. However, Hartini expressed disagreement and provided her explanation. Jani and Mohd shared similar understanding and tried to convince Hartini by explaining to her. However, Hartini was adamant about what she thought and she tried to convince the others in her team. Eventually, they all agreed to have two types of pollution, water and sea pollution, as suggested by Mohd (lines 49-50). Evidence of raising questions and investigation of the materials can be seen in their learner interactions as they explored them together. Their learner interactions were highly collaborative with episodes of intensive negotiation.

Excerpt 2   Decision-making (Joint Meaning-making)

Hartini:	The air pollution.
Mohd:	Air pollution?
Hartini:	Air pollution.
Jani:	Where?

Hartini:	This picture.
Jani:	Ha!
Mohd:	Air pollution?
Hartini:	Yes.
Jani:	Because this something *apa*, we call that?
Mohd:	This is foreigner, eh, foreign.
Jani:	Factory *la*!
Mohd:	This is factory so I think foreign relate to air pollution.
Jani:	Ok, then I think this *ni* water because this in the water.
Mohd:	Yes, I think also, excuse me, are you sure this picture water pollution because this is water and fish.
Jani:	Then?
Mohd:	And then I think this also, excuse me, I think this also what we call, this water pollution because.
Hartini:	I think this water pollution. Sorry to interrupt, I think I don't agree with water pollution because this picture is good to water pollution.
Jani:	I think may be yes because it show that something they throw, something to the water.
Mohd:	Excuse me, sorry to interrupt, I think this is a water pollution and this like *air*, like at sea. (lines 49-50)
Hartini:	Sorry to interrupt, I think this picture is sea pollution.
Jani:	But this is impact of water pollution.
Hartini:	Sea pollution.
Jani:	Oh have two, water and sea pollution.
Mohd:	Ok, what do you think that relate with sea pollution*?*
Jani:	I think this sea, sea pollution because has *rumpai,* doesn't look like water pollution.
Mohd:	This water I think, this is water pollution. *(DM2/Brown/27-58)*

Argumentative episodes

Apart from being characterized by joint investigation and joint meaning-making, the collaborative interaction was also characterized by argumentative episodes. Argumentative mode did not imply that the participants argued with one another during their discussion. Instead, they negotiated their differences and resolved conflicts by arguing their points in a rationale way. They provided reasons and justifications in order to achieve a shared understanding of the situation. Judgments and justifications normally led to a shared understanding of the situation. The argumentative episodes were found in the participants' learner interactions when they engaged in both task types. When engaged in the jigsaw task completion, the argumentative episodes identified were short and straight forward with some explanations given. This was because what the participants wanted to achieve was to understand the input to ensure accurate completion of the tasks. As seen in Excerpt 3, Hartini tried to explain to her team what an anemone was. She tried to explain the meaning of the word to both Mohd and Jani but they could not understand. Mohd argued with her insisting that an anemone was not an animal as claimed by Hartini. She explained further (lines 109, 111, 113, 115 & 117) and finally Mohd understood and accepted her explanation (line 119).

Excerpt 3   Jigsaw (Argumentative)

Hartini:	Then the tide pool also has a sea anemone like look, like flower but they are animals that catch and eat other animals with their flower like part.
Mohd:	You mean the animal like flower?

Hartini:	No, in tide pool also have a sea anemone that like flower. (line 109)
Mohd:	Oh, like *rumpai*.
Hartini:	But they are animal. (line 111)
Mohd:	This still *rumpai*, but not animal.
Hartini:	No, like flower. (line 113)
Jani:	Animal like flower.
Hartini:	No, *rumpai laut*. (line 115)
Jani:	[giggle]
Hartini:	*Sejenis bunga*. (line 117)
Jani:	*Tapi sejenis binatang*.
Mohd:	Ok, I know. (line 119) *(J1/Brown/106-119)*

A different kind of learner interaction consisting of argumentative episodes was observed when the participants engaged in the decision-making task completion. Excerpt 4 illustrates an argumentative episode during decision-making task completion. Intensive negotiation and argumentative instances can be observed as the participants worked on the materials they had. They discussed the best possible way to present their ideas in writing. Faizal shared his idea on what to write first. However, Wan did not appear to agree, had different views and challenged Faizal's idea. They argued and negotiated intensively before reaching an agreement (e.g. lines 211, 212-213, 214-215, 216, 218 & 219). In this episode, instances of ideas or opinions being challenged with intensive negotiation could be observed. Arguments and disagreements led to ideas being challenged and explanations being sought by the participants.

Excerpt 4   Decision-making (Argumentative)

Aina:	Logging are divide. Logging…are divide…into…two.
Faizal:	I think we should not mention two. We just logging are divide into legal and illegal activity.
Aina:	Legal and illegal activity?
Wan:	Effect the logging.
Faizal:	Nowadays in Malaysia has many… (line 211)
Wan:	Nowadays? Why should we do the first paragraph is effect, second paragraph is suggestion…to…rmmm (lines 212-213)
Faizal:	I agree with you, Nowadays we must mention illegal activity in Malaysia. (lines 214-215)
Wan:	I think nowadays is not suitable. (line 216)
Faizal:	Ok.
Wan:	Nowadays? (line 218)
Faizal:	So what is your suggestion? (line 219)
Wan:	No, no, not nowadays. What, what your sentence?
Faizal:	Nowadays so many illegal logging activity at Malaysia.
Wan:	At or in?
Faizal:	At. This activity give many effect.
Aina:	Ok, ok. We use this. Nowadays? What?
Faizal:	Nowadays, so many…illegal.
Aina:	[Activity]
Wan:	So many illegal.
Faizal:	I think before illegal activity is illegal logging activity.
Wan:	Logging activities.
Faizal:	In or at?
Aina:	In.
Faizal:	In Malaysia. *(DM2/Red/206-232)*

DISCUSSION

The research question concerned how EFL learners interacted using different communication task types and the kind of oral discourse they generated. When engaged in task completion for both task types, it was observed that close collaboration was evident throughout their learner interactions. The collaborative interaction was highlighted by episodes of joint meaning-making and was characterized mainly by episodes of asking for clarification and asking for more explanation. These episodes gave evidence of joint meaning-making among them in trying to build and achieve inter-subjectivity (Wells, 1987). The element of inter-subjectivity is very much related to collaboration and occurs through constant negotiation. However, when observed closely, during the decision-making task completion the participants' learner interactions were highly collaborative with evidence of intensive negotiation compared to when engaged in the jigsaw task completion. The participants negotiated ideas and provided extended explanation in order to achieve mutual understanding. Their interaction episodes were not straight forward as they took time to explain as seen in Excerpt 2. They generated complex patterns of interaction when they negotiated ideas. For this study, it was observed that the decision-making task type was the type that encouraged the production of complex patterns of interactions and the generation of more complex ideas.

Another significant finding was the existence of argumentative interaction episodes. These episodes were observed to occur when the participants tried to jointly make meaning especially while writing together. Instances of disagreement were observed. They argued on content, sentence structures and word choices. They also revised what they had composed by either changing or modifying it. The collaborative writing encouraged them to engage in interactional modifications and produced modified output during their learner interactions. This can be observed in both Excerpts 3 and 4. It is believed that when the participants in this present study engaged in argumentative mode and produced modified output during their learner interactions, not only did they push themselves, the whole process may assist them to "*control and internalize linguistic knowledge*" (Swain, 1995). However, when closely observed, during the decision-making task completion, the participants engaged in argumentative episodes with evidence of intensive negotiation more extensively compared to when engaged in the jigsaw task completion. The participants presented their arguments in a more explicit way and provided support to maintain their opinions. Strategies and solutions were also jointly created and tested. The participants' collaborative interactions, characterized by intensive negotiation and argumentative episodes reflected intensive task engagement where a lot of effort was put on exploring and communicating ideas, providing suggestions and explanations. During interaction, when there is a difference of opinion among the speakers, episodes of questioning, asking for clarification and reasoning emerge as they need to solve the difference of opinion. It is argued that clarification requests found in argumentative episodes are related to critical thinking and problem solving (Andriessen, 2006; Billig, 1987; Candela, 1997; Chin & Osborne, 2010; Rogoff, 1990). Further, argumentation which includes episodes of questioning and reasoning is an important feature of effective interaction (Cohen, 1994). In this study, it was the decision-making tasks that encouraged the production of interactional and linguistics modifications coupled with interaction episodes which were argumentative in nature with rigorous negotiations.

Understanding the dynamics of learner interactions during different task completion has crucial pedagogical implication as this knowledge can be used as a basis for informed pedagogical practice in the L2 classroom particularly in an EFL context. Findings revealed that when they interacted, they did not just produce language and make modifications. They engaged in collaborative interactions and explored ideas through dialogue. They produced

complex patterns of interactions and generated more complex ideas. Their collaborative interaction was also characterized by argumentative episodes. These collaborative interactions characterized by argumentative episodes generated more complex ideas to emerge and to be negotiated in interaction. Basturkmen (2002) argues that complex patterns of interactions are "*important in enabling students to develop their own ideas in discussion.*" When engaged in these complex patterns of interactions, learners are able to articulate thoughts and clarify thinking more clearly. It is these kinds of interactions that are important particularly for learners at the tertiary level. Based on the results of the present study, it was observed that the decision-making task type was the type that encouraged the production of complex patterns of interactions and the generation of more complex ideas as found in their interaction episodes. The participants were able to generate the kind of interaction episodes believed to be facilitative of their language learning. This was evident in the interaction episodes when they engaged in the decision-making task completion.

Findings also expand the understanding of the characteristics of communication language tasks. While requests for clarification can be encouraged using communication language tasks (e.g. Pica et al., 1993), findings from this study revealed that they can also be used and manipulated to encourage and develop argumentative skills particularly the decision-making tasks. Hence, pedagogically, the use of decision-making tasks should be encouraged more as they provide learners with opportunities to develop their language abilities to reason and argue. Engaging in the argumentative use of language encourages learners to think critically and evaluate their understanding as well as justify their opinions. These are highly valued in education (Cohen, 1994; Mercer, Phillips & Somekh, 1991) and are particularly important for learners at the tertiary level to develop.

CONCLUSIONS

Results from this study illustrate how the different communication tasks affect the dynamics of learner interaction and shape the kind of oral discourse they generate which in turn promote language development. The findings confirm the positive relationships that exist between communication tasks and instances of negotiation. They further illustrate the task type that encouraged the production of complex patterns of interactions and the generation of more complex ideas believed important particularly for learners at the tertiary level. While the findings from this study have its contribution, much more research is still needed. Firstly, even though the study is relevant to an EFL tertiary level context in general, the findings are specific to a given classroom context where the data were obtained. This is because the participants in this study shared several unique features/characteristics. All the participants were from the same ethnic group (i.e. Malay), shared the same L1 (i.e. Malay language) and were all Malaysians. On top of that, they also shared similar secondary school background, which was the Islamic religious secondary school background. Thus, given these unique characteristics, the results of this study cannot be taken to be representative of learners in other institutions of higher learning in Malaysia or other EFL contexts. The results also cannot be generalised to other L2 teaching and learning contexts. However, although generalisability of the study may be limited due to the unique composition of the groups, there are elements of the results which may be transferable to other research contexts such as the characteristics of the students. The result of this study can still be of benefit to other researchers. As highlighted by Guba and Lincoln (1989), the issue in qualitative-interpretive research is transferability rather than generalisability. Conducting similar study in different instructional contexts could provide more comprehensive results. Thus, for future research, other researchers may transfer what is applicable, suitable and relevant to their EFL contexts and situations rather than make generalisation.

Another matter that is related to the direction of future study is the framework of the study. In this study, the link between different communication task types and learners' language output could be understood in the light of an interactionist approach using Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis and Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis. Both the Interaction Hypothesis and the Output Hypothesis place emphasis on the importance of interaction and output in second language learning and support the use of task-based activities in a language classroom. Hence, the focus of findings was within the interactionist perspectives. Future research can be conducted investigating learner interactions from another perspective which is the from the sociocultural (SCT) approach. It is believed that findings investigated from this approach would yield a more comprehensive understanding about the language learning that occurs through interaction and thus, would complement those from the interactionist approach. Additionally, by analysing data from learner interactions elicited during task completion of peers within the SCT framework, researchers would be able to understand how "*learners in a guided pair work interactive context move forward in their acquisition of the L2, sharing their strengths through the process of collaborative learning*" (Ohta, 1995).

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