Conversational Shadowing
Matthew Y. Schaefer

ABSTRACT

While the "strong" and "weak" forms of the Interaction Hypothesis differ in terms of viewing language learning as a process or a product, they both agree that meaningful interaction is a necessary component of developing a learner's communicative competence. The most obvious way that interaction is said to be of benefit is that it provides practice of the skill that it is trying to promote. In addition, it allows for multiple instances of not only expressing and interpreting, but also negotiating meaning – a necessary skill in any real-world language use. Conversational shadowing is an interaction strategy that leads to negotiation of meaning and is relatively easy to introduce into an English discussion class through quick, controlled practice activities. This paper shows both how to integrate it into freer speaking activities and how it may aid communication in a variety of ways.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Interaction Hypothesis, at its simplest, states that language proficiency is improved through face-to-face interaction and communication (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Although some researchers have challenged this idea by claiming that other factors may be of greater importance in terms of overall proficiency, it seems commonsensical to assume that the specific improvement of a learner's ability to interact in spoken discussions will be greatly enhanced through actual interaction.

Early approaches to looking at the primacy of interaction in language learning put emphasis on the need for, variously, comprehensible input, negotiation to repair communication problems, noticing of new language, and comparison of the learner's knowledge with the input (Ellis, 1991). However, these were very much focused on development of a learner's linguistic competence, i.e. how new forms (e.g. grammatical, phonological) could be acquired. Long (1996), on the other hand, created the Interaction Hypothesis, which views acquisition in terms of overall communicative competence and therefore considers how learners can improve their ability to use language in communicative contexts. A crucial ingredient is the presence of negotiation of meaning, in the form of interactional adjustment, through which interlocutors work together to fix communication problems and, possibly as a result, collaborate to construct meaning in a way that would not have been possible had the participants been working alone. This allows for the possibility that learners can become more competent users of the target language in terms of taking part in true communication, defined here as the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning (Savignon, 1997).

Although language learning has thus far been described alternately as "development [of competence]" or "acquisition [of skills]" (Ellis, 2012), the difference between the two reflects the two forms of the Interaction Hypothesis: the "strong" form and the "weak" form. The strong form comes from a sociocultural theory perspective, which says that language learning is a process, not a product, and one that begins on the social plane (intermental) before developing into something that can be managed independently (intramental). This view treats language use among more than one participant as the language learning itself; in other words, when a learner has to interact in the target language, the attempts to communicate despite deficiencies in communicative competence result in development.

The weak form represents interactionist-cognitive theories of language learning, which

say that interaction provides learners with input to process. This, potentially, leads to acquisition of more advanced features and skills that can be put into practice in later opportunities for communication. Crucially, the input provided by interaction is made "richer" because of the way linguistic features are made more noticeable (for example, through negotiations of meaning) and the way cognitive processes are activated to encourage acquisition.

Although it is not clear to this author which model of language learning through interaction is more persuasive (i.e. development *equals* use, or acquisition *comes from* use), what does seem convincing is that interaction is a key to improving language use, especially when the target use is spoken discussions. In EDC lessons, whose overall aim is to improve learners' fluency, student-student interaction is a necessary feature. The goal for the instructor, then, is to make this interaction as beneficial as possible in terms of allowing students to improve their discussion performance. From a sociocultural theory perspective, this means encouraging collaboration among participants so that they are co-creating meaning and, potentially, a higher level of language use. From the perspective of interactionist-cognitive theories, it means giving students tools with which they can make the input they provide each other with as rich as possible in order to facilitate better acquisition of language skills through the "noticing" of particular language items. From both points of view, negotiation for meaning can be considered an important aspect of strategic competence that will contribute to improved interaction.

Swain (1997) describes "collaborative dialogue" as the joint construction of language, or knowledge about language, that takes place during, and because of, interaction. (Note: Although "dialogue" clearly refers to a situation with two speakers, there is no reason to suggest that the theories described here would not also apply to interactions among slightly larger groups of speakers.) This is considered somewhat different to the ways that input and output may effect improvements in communicative competence (although both, of course, feature in interaction). The main difference is that the two or more interlocutors involved will share linguistic resources to move beyond their current linguistic and/or cognitive state. If a focus on communication is maintained, each speaker is constantly being held accountable for, and simultaneously being supported in, the meaning that they are attempting to express. This requires skills that, for most language learners at least, can not be easily practiced individually. Swain (2000) illustrates this with several samples of learners' performance, in which they each contribute separate "pieces of a puzzle" that together provide a clearer picture of what they are trying to achieve. Although many of her examples feature learners discussing grammatical knowledge (i.e. the forms of language), she makes it clear that collaboration also includes joint development of both semantic knowledge (i.e. how those forms convey meaning) and the ideas those meanings are being used to express (i.e. content).

Mackey (2006) explains how certain interactional processes, such as requests for clarification and recasts, can lead to modified output, chiefly by helping the speaker notice insufficiencies in their initial output. Modified output by the speaker can equal richer input for the listener. In this context, "richer" means input that is more communicative (i.e. the meaning being conveyed is more easily understood) and that contains more noticeable features, which a learner can use to acquire more advanced skills. Mackey reports on research whose results show a clear, positive relationship between in-conversation feedback and noticing of linguistic items. Although the referenced study featured dialogues between native speakers and non-native speakers, it may be inferred that similar results could come out of interactions among only non-native speakers as authentic requests for clarification and recasts would be expected to naturally occur (and have been informally observed in class by the author). In this setting, learners who use appropriate listening strategies are creating the opportunity for input that is

more likely to be noticed by all participants involved. As a result, acquisition of new ideas, and the language forms used to express those ideas, may occur.

Interaction, as seen by both sociocultural theory and interactionist-cognitive approaches, is not simply a matter of one interlocutor expressing an idea and another interlocutor interpreting that idea. Whether language development happens during the interaction or acquisition arises out of it, a common feature is that, during a communication problem, the speakers work together to arrive at meaning that is understood by both. This is said to happen through negotiation for meaning. Pica (1992, p. 200) defines negotiation for meaning as "an activity that occurs when a listener signals to the speaker that the speaker's message is not clear and the speaker and the listener work linguistically to resolve this impasse." Foster and Ohta (2005) point out that this linguistic problem-solving is of particular benefit according to the Interaction Hypothesis as it creates opportunities for input and output to be connected in creative ways. They also identify ways that speakers can negotiate for meaning, focusing on the three 'C's (Comprehension checks, Clarification requests, and Confirmation checks), and look at research into how their use affects learners' interactions. Comprehension checks are defined as expressions used by the speaker to establish whether or not the listeners have understood the speaker's original utterance (e.g. *Do you understand?*). Confirmation checks are expressions used by the listener to check that they have understood the speaker's original utterance (e.g. *Do you mean…?*). Clarification requests are expressions used by the listener to ask the speaker to make their original utterance more easily understood (e.g. *Can you explain?*). Foster and Ohta examined research to look at how often a group of learners initiated negotiation for meaning during a task and how this caused modified output to be produced. They found that there was little evidence for the flow of interaction being interrupted because of learners trying to verify the meaning of what was being expressed. They did, however, find that the participants would consistently repair their own output and help each other arrive at a satisfactory way of expressing meaning. From a sociocultural perspective, this was seen as instances of collaboration in which learners assisted one another in order to move the interaction forward. From an interactionist-cognitive point of view, it was viewed as learners creating input that they could use to acquire forms that would push their interlanguage forward.

The activity chosen to reflect the teaching principles above is conversational shadowing, which is defined as "the partial to complete repetitions by listeners of a speaker's utterances" (Murphey, 2001). An example is presented in context below, with the actual shadowing in bold:

> Speaker A: *I think the best reason to study abroad is to learn a new culture.*
> Speaker B: ***Learn a new culture.*** *I see.*

This example shows *selective*, *out loud* shadowing, although it can also occur elsewhere on continuums leading to *complete* shadowing or *silent* shadowing. Conversational shadowing is often classified as a communication strategy (Dornyei & Scott, 1997), although it can serve a variety of purposes.

The first purpose is as a reaction, which means that it is simply indicating to the speaker that the listener is listening to (and possibly interested in) what is being said. In this case, it has little impact on any negotiation for meaning, but it can build rapport among interlocutors, encouraging the speaker and thereby encouraging further interaction. Another purpose is as a confirmation check, which involves the listener checking with the speaker that they have understood what was said. This can be considered negotiation for meaning as it deals with the potential for communication problems. If the shadowing matches what the speaker wanted to

express, there is no need for any clarification; if it doesn't, the speaker can repeat or paraphrase the idea so that communication is achieved. A third purpose is as a clarification request, which is also negotiation for meaning. Here, the listener is clearly signaling to the speaker that the original utterance was not understood and would therefore like further explanation. For this purpose, the shadowing is in the form (i.e. using the intonation) of a question. It is also often less complete as the listener likely did not comprehend the full utterance. For example:

> Speaker C: *I think the best reason to study abroad is to learn a new culture.*
> Speaker D: ***Learn a new…?***

This can often be more effective than other types of clarification requests (e.g. *Could you repeat that, please?*) as it focuses the speaker on which part of the utterance needs to be clarified.

Shadowing is also described as a type of listening strategy and the active listening it promotes can aid comprehension in two key ways. Firstly, it forces the listener to notice more carefully what the speaker is saying. If a learner is asked to shadow during an activity, they must allocate cognitive resources to be able to do so in a way that promotes at least an attempt at comprehension. Of course, it is possible to shadow without comprehension, but it does increase the possibility of successful interpretation of meaning. Secondly, shadowing is one way to regulate the speaker's length of utterance; in other words, it creates a natural break in a speaking turn. Shorter utterances are generally easier to understand than longer ones. These two effects of shadowing can be seen as further ways of making input more comprehensible and noticeable.

Finally, it should be noted that shadowing is a highly interactive process. It is, by its nature, directly connected to another speaker's utterance and may elicit a direct response (as in the case of clarification requests). It may reduce the number of instances in a discussion of participants simply waiting their turn to speak before giving their own idea, and encourage them to listen more attentively and collaborate to develop new ideas.

TASK & MATERIALS

In order to not take too much time away from the main aims of the EDC course, it was decided to integrate the introduction of shadowing into the 3-2-1 fluency activity that is a required stage of each EDC lesson. This activity has students divided into speakers and listeners, with the speakers repeating the same topic-based monologue three times, with increased time pressure, to three different listeners. The listeners are told to not ask questions or talk about the topic themselves, but are encouraged to use rejoinders (e.g. *I see*, *Really?*). The speakers are prompted by two topic-based questions, the answers to which are the starting point of their monologues. In order to help some (usually lower-level) students roughly prepare the content of their monologues, they may be given time to think about the question prompts before beginning to speak. While the activity introducing shadowing to students was not based on any specific topic (in order to focus on the mechanics of the strategy), subsequent shadowing activities were conducted as a starting point for content generation for the 3-2-1 fluency activity. As in the example above, "selective, out loud" shadowing was taught to students, with the focus on shadowing key words or phrases. Shadowing was introduced to Level II, III, and IV classes.

To introduce the concept of shadowing to students, handouts are used for controlled and semi-controlled practice activities (see Appendices A-C). Once students are aware of how to apply shadowing to their interactions, no additional materials are required to encourage their use.

PROCEDURE
Week 1
This can be done at any appropriate stage of the Introduction Lesson. Students are given a handout (Appendix A) and asked to complete the sentences. In pairs, they take turns reading out their completed sentences, and their partners then shadow the key words (i.e. the inserted words/phrases), followed by a rejoinder. For example:

> A: My favorite food is pizza.
> B: Pizza! I see.

The instructor can then identify and label the strategy as 'shadowing' to the students, as well as explaining its benefits, so that it is easier to reference in future lessons.

Week 2
Before the 3-2-1 fluency activity, students are given a handout (Appendix B) and asked to complete the sentences. These sentences are directly related to the topic-based fluency questions (1. What foreign languages have you studied? What foreign languages do you study now? 2. Do you think learning foreign languages is important?). Once again, students in pairs take turns reading out their completed sentences, and their partners then shadow the key words/phrases, followed by a rejoinder. For example:

> A: I want to study Polish.
> B: Polish! Really?

They then complete the 3-2-1 fluency activity as normal, with two provisos. First, pairs from the shadowing activity should be put together as either speakers or listeners; this is to ensure that they do not speak to each other, which might have the effect of reducing the communicativeness of the activity. Second, before each speaking turn, the instructor reminds the listeners to shadow their speaking partners' key words, in addition to the regular use of rejoinders.

Week 3
Again, before the 3-2-1 fluency activity, students are given a handout (Appendix C) and asked to complete the sentences, which are connected to the topic-based fluency questions. As before, students in pairs take turns reading out their completed sentences, and their partners then shadow the key words/phrases. However, this time, they are asked to shadow with question (i.e. rising) intonation, even if they fully understood the key word or phrase. The speaker should then respond by further explaining. This explanation can take the form of either further describing the key word or phrase, or explaining why it was chosen. For example:

> A: My favorite foreign food is a burrito.
> B: Burrito?
> A: Yes, it's a kind of Mexican food with meat, vegetables, and rice wrapped together.
> B: I see.
>
> A: A foreign country I want to visit is Russia.
> B: Russia?
> A: Yes, because I am very interested in Russian culture and history.
> B: That's great!

The instructor then explains how shadowing can be used not only as a rejoinder, but also to show that the listener has not understood or wants more information. The 3-2-1 fluency activity is then done, again with previous pairs separated from speaking to each other and the instructor encouraging shadowing (as either a rejoinder or as a question). Students are also reminded that

they can repeat any of the content from the previous activity during their speaking turns.

Weeks 4-5
Similar preparation is done (i.e. completing the gapped sentences), but students do not do the controlled shadowing practice. Instead, they are only reminded to shadow between each speaking turn of the 3-2-1 fluency activity. The instructor listens to how often students use shadowing and gives feedback on their frequency of use.

Weeks 6-14
Students are reminded to use shadowing during the 3-2-1 fluency activity, but only when its use becomes less frequent. Positive feedback is also given to students when they use shadowing during other stages of the lesson (i.e. function practice activities, discussion preparations, discussions).

VARIATIONS
The above activities have all used *partial* shadowing, but it would also be possible to have student do *complete* shadowing. For example:
    A: My hobby is reading books.
    B: Your hobby is reading books. I see.
This may be especially useful for lower-level students as it would require them to pay closer attention to what is being said, as well as providing them with more opportunities to produce target forms.

Another variation would be to allow students to do *silent* shadowing, rather than the *out loud* shadowing featured so far. Silent shadowing means that the repetition happens only in the listener's mind, with no actual vocalization, although it may be accompanied by lip movements. Although there would be no certain way to check whether or not students are actually silently shadowing, it might be an option for quieter students who would not yet feel comfortable doing out loud shadowing, and may even act as a stepping stone towards it. Silent shadowing would still have the effect of having students listen more carefully to their interlocutors, and it might encourage some kind of signaling of a lack of comprehension.

DISCUSSION
The effect of the shadowing activities, in terms of acquisition of this strategy, varied a lot among my students. While all students were able to use it well during the controlled activities, some used it a lot during the 3-2-1 fluency activity, while others did not use it at all. Similarly, some students began applying it to other stages of the lesson (e.g. discussions) very early in the semester, while others began applying it later in the semester; there were, of course, some who did not use it all after week 5. This is possibly due in part to the fact that I did not encourage shadowing outside of the 3-2-1 fluency activity, beyond providing positive feedback when it was used in discussions.

Among the students who eventually were shadowing regularly throughout the lessons, its use by the end of the semester appeared to have become quite natural, i.e. they seemed to be doing it without too much conscious effort and, when used as a rejoinder, it did not break the flow of the interactions. I informally recorded several instances of this kind of shadowing use. For example:
    Student C: Last month, I went to Germany with friends.
    Student D: Germany! That's great!

> Student C: Yes, we stayed there for two weeks.

There were also several noted instances of students using shadowing as a clarification request. For example:

> Student E: They don't ring the bell.
> Student F: Ring the bell?
> Student E: Yes, to make a noise at the front door.

In addition to the above examples, there were instances when incorrect shadowing signaled miscommunication, which also led to clarification. For example:

> Student G: My neighbor hit the wall.
> Student H: Hit a ball?
> Student G: No, hit the *wall*.
> Student H: Oh, the wall.

All of these examples show that shadowing has improved the communication in these interactions, either through confirmations or by creating opportunities for clarification. It is therefore the supposition of this article that the acquisition of the communication strategy of shadowing and its use is beneficial for the kind of communicative interactions that occur in EDC lessons.

CONCLUSION

Although there were several noted instances of shadowing use in the author's lessons (see above), it is not clear how many (if any) were due to the controlled practice shadowing activities done early in the semester. In other words, students may have already been familiar with this strategy (either procedurally or declaratively) before taking this course. In addition, it may have been something that they naturally began doing after having completed many hours of classroom interaction. One important part of formally assessing the activities described in this article would be to determine at the beginning of the course whether or not students are already familiar with shadowing and/or if they already use it in their spoken interactions. This could perhaps be done through a questionnaire and recording of students' discussions. It would also be beneficial to have a control group to determine if it is a naturally occurring strategy among certain students.

In order to assess students acquisition and use of shadowing during and subsequent to the controlled practice activities, recording of 3-2-1 fluency activities, pair discussion preparation activities, and discussions could be made and analyzed for instances of shadowing. The type of shadowing being used (e.g. confirmation checks or clarification requests) could then be determined. In addition, it could be beneficial to track how clarifications are responded to, i.e. whether or not the communication breakdown has been repaired. Finally, it may be of interest to see if shadowing is more common during interaction between pairs or among groups.

REFERENCES

Dörnyei, Z., & Scott, M. L. (1997). Communication strategies in a second language: Definitions and taxonomies. *Language learning*, *47*(1), 173-210.

Ellis, R. (1991). *The Interaction Hypothesis: A Critical Evaluation.* Paper presented at the Regional Language Centre Seminar. Singapore, April 22-28.

Ellis, R. (2012). *Language Teaching Research and Language Pedagogy.* Wiley-Blackwell.

Foster, P. & Ohta, A. S. (2005). Negotiation for meaning and peer assistance in second language classrooms. Applied Linguistics, 26/3, 402-430.

Johnson, K. & Johnson, H. (1999). "Interaction Hypothesis". In *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Applied Linguistics: A Handbook for Language Teaching*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers,

174.

Long, M. (1996). The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition. In W. Ritchie & T. Bhatia (Eds.), *Handbook of Second Language Acquisition* (p. 413-468). San Diego: Academic Press.

Mackey, A. (1999). Input, interaction, and second language development. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *21*(04), 557–587.

Murphey, T. (2001). Exploring conversational shadowing. *Language Teaching Research, 5,2*, 128-155.

Pica, T. (1992). The textual outcomes of native speaker – non-native speakernegotiation. In C. Kramsch & S. McConnell-Ginet (Eds.), *Test and context: Cross-disciplinary perspectives on language study* (p. 198-237). Lexington, MA: Heath.

Savignon, S. (1997). *Communicative competence: theory and classroom practice*. McGraw-Hill.

Swain, M. (1997). Collaborative dialogue: Its contribution to second language learning. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 34*, 115-132.

Swain, M. (2000). The output hypothesis and beyond: Mediating acquisition through collaborative dialogue. *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*, *97*, 114.

APPENDIX A

1. My hobby is _____.

2. My favorite food is _____.

3. My birthday is _____.

4. My favorite season is _____.

APPENDIX B

1. What foreign languages have you studied?

"I have studied _____."

2. What foreign languages do you want to study?

"I want to study _____."

3. *"I **think / don't think** learning foreign languages is important."*

APPENDIX C

1. *"I have been to _____[foreign countries]."*

2. *"A foreign country I want to visit is _____."*

3. *"My favorite foreign food is _____."*

- Where would you like to study abroad?

  _____

- Where would you like to work abroad?

  _____