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DOES LANGUAGE LEARNERS BENEFIT FROM CLASSROOM INTERACTION?

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INTRODUCTION

During the past few years a lot of research has been done in order to analyse the relevance of classroom interaction when learners are acquiring a second language.

A lot of attention has been paid to the role of negotiation in language learning and different studies have been carried out comparing tasks which are done individually and cooperatively.

When dealing with second language acquisition it is important to pay attention to several factors which may motivate and facilitate learner's acquisition. The use of pair work and the consequent peer feedback when dealing with communicative tasks provoke an interaction which is very relevant to SLA.

Most of the research done in this field is of great importance to mention in order to place this study, and treating conversational interaction and theoretical conditions for SLA, we must necessarily pay attention to input, output and feedback.

Following the work by Long (1983,1985) we can find that when second language learners experience communication problems and have the opportunity to negotiate solutions, they are able to acquire a new language. Therefore, Long deduced that conversational modifications when interacting two or more people were important in order to promote acquisition.

Another important theory with regard to learners' need for comprehensible input was the theory of Krashen (1985) which suggests that comprehension of message meaning is necessary if learners are to internalize L2 forms and structures. Krashen's "input hypothesis" is based on both input and interaction modifications.

Both Long and Krashen see comprehensible input as a source of acquisition, although there are other researchers who argue that comprehensible input is necessary, but not sufficient to promote acquisition. Swain (1985) develops, therefore, what is called as "comprehensible output" and she studies the effect of pushing language learners into language. According to her "output hypothesis", she suggests three functions of learners' output which relate to accuracy rather than fluency. These three functions have also been the focus of attention of many other researchers.

The first function is the noticing function (Swain, 1995:125-126), which means:

"In producing the target language (vocally or subvocally) learners may notice a gap between what they want to say and what they can say, leading them to recognize what they do not know, or know only partially, about the target language. In other words, under some circumstances, the activity of producing the target language may prompt second language learners to consciously recognize some of their linguistic problems; it may bring to their attention something they need to discover about their L2."

In relation to the hypothesis-testing function, research supports the fact that by responding to interlocutors' feedback, learners modify their output either semantically or morphologically (Pica et al., 1989; Tarone and Liu, 1995).

Paying attention to the third function, the metalinguistic function (a conscious reflection about language while we are mainly concerned with getting meaning across), we find some researchers (Ellis, 1982; Nunan, 1989) who have elaborated tasks more concerned with meaning rather than form, whereas other studies (Donato, 1994) suggest that learners' negotiation of form is also likely to produce output that promotes second language learning.

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Another theoretical condition for SLA is learners' need for feedback, also referred to as negative input. This negative feedback is related to error correction and negation on form. This is very important because learners become aware of their errors, and through feedback modifications they learn. Therefore, output and feedback go always together and we can find three different types of feedback, from which the last two ones are of great importance when teaching English as a second language in the classroom. These three sorts of feedback are:

- corrective feedback on content
- corrective feedback on meaning
- corrective feedback on form

An important researcher who has studied this issue is Pica. In one of her studies, she (1996b: 252) suggests that:

“negative input is considered important for language learning because it provides metalinguistic information on the clarity, accuracy, and/or comprehensibility of the learners' own production and help them to notice forms in their interlanguage that are not consistent with standard varieties of the L2, but are difficult to detect during the even flow of social communication.”

In another of her previous articles, Pica (1994) supports the importance of interaction in language learning, and she focuses on a specific type of interaction: negotiation. This is, as she (1994:494) defines:

“the modification and restructuring of interaction that occurs when learners and their interlocutors anticipate, perceive, or experience difficulties in message comprehensibility. As they negotiate, they work linguistically to achieve the needed comprehensibility, whether repeating a message verbatim, adjusting its syntax, changing its words, or modifying its form and meaning in a host of other ways.”

Other researchers such as White (1987) and Gass (1997) also support the importance of feedback, and particularly feedback as a source of negative evidence. In their studies, they claim that it is incomprehensible input what becomes the input for learners to recognize the inadequacy of their own rule system, and then this may trigger learners' recognition of mismatches between their IL grammar and that of their L2 target.

Following on this line, recent studies take into consideration other variables such as the use of a particular task carried out individually or cooperatively. In two of her studies, Storch (1998, 1999) pays attention to the use of peer feedback in collaborative writing tasks and the use of pair work as a positive effect when doing exercises. However, on the contrary to what Pica (1994) has previously done focusing her research on meaning, Storch (1998:298) works with grammar-focused tasks in order to examine that second language learners working collaboratively can provide each other with the necessary feedback, and that such feedback results in language learning. Therefore, while Pica (1994:518) found that negotiation seemed to work most readily on lexical items and larger syntactic units, whereas negotiation over grammatical morphology was rare, Storch (1998) uses grammar tasks such as a cloze exercise, a text reconstruction task or a short composition, and compares these

tasks performed individually or completed in pairs in order to see that collaboration had a positive effect on overall grammatical accuracy.

In this line, in another of her studies, Storch (1999:364) states that other researches such as Kowal and Swain (1994) and Swain and Lapkin (1998) have already proposed the use of such tasks which require collaborative written output as a means of drawing learners' attention to grammatical accuracy within a communicative context.

There are more studies which take into consideration this shift towards drawing learners' attention to form rather than meaning. In the research carried out by Gass et al., (1999) there is a focus of attention on examining the ability learners have when using their L2 knowledge in production and the effects of task repetition on the linguistic output of second language learners. Their results show an improvement in overall proficiency, selected morphosyntax, and lexical sophistication when using task repetition.

In another study, Williams (1999) also suggests that a lot of attention has been drawn to the negotiation of meaning (Pica,1994), but not to the negotiation of form. According to her, learners choose to focus on lexical rather than grammatical issues, and she (1999:585) states that:

“There appears to be empirical support for both collaborative learning activities and for some degree of focus on form, yet it is not clear how the goals of increasing learner participation, cooperation, and autonomy might be meshed with the integration of an increased attention to language form within a communicative second language curriculum.”

She concludes that beginning learners do not initiate a focus on form frequently because they cannot. Learners at all levels are more concerned with sorting out lexical meaning than grammatical form, though, as they become proficient, they are increasingly willing and/or able to address more grammatical issues on their own.

Therefore, the shift towards more attention to form and the importance of cooperative learning are the focus of attention in the last few years. Paying attention to this last aspect, we find that Ghaith and Yaghi (1998) also state that cooperative learning is more effective than individualistic instruction in improving the linguistic gains of an ESL learner. Their results confirm that cooperation is good for both low-aptitude and high-aptitude students, because the first ones receive input through cooperative learning, and the high-achieving students, through interaction, enhance their understanding as they explain concepts to others.

Swain's output hypothesis has also been studied and analysed by many other researchers. Shehadeh (1999) also considers that comprehensible input is not sufficient for successful second language acquisition, and he states that opportunities for non-native speakers to produce comprehensible output are also necessary. Therefore, he studies the ability of those speakers to modify their IL utterances in the direction of comprehensible output, and he terms this in his study as modified comprehensible output (MCO). He arrives to the conclusion that the role of L2 learners' output should be extended beyond just being a source of obtaining feedback in order to generate more comprehensible output. Izumi et al., (1999) make another study based also on the output hypothesis realised by Swain. They investigate the effects of output on noticing and second language acquisition, and they (1999:446-447) conclude that:

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“in order for output to lead to final intake, it would be necessary for the task not to place heavy cognitive demands on the learners as they engage in output activities and ... that it is important to devise tasks that could adequately control for the learners’ focus of attention, while ensuring that their processing capacity is not overloaded.”

After revising all these studies, we find that input, output and feedback are of great relevance when dealing with second language acquisition. Moreover, a lot of attention has also been paid to the role that working cooperatively plays. Finally, what it is also important to take into consideration is the election of the task to be carried out. As Alcón (in press) suggests, it is of crucial relevance to choose tasks which involve a mutual recognition and concern for each other’s objectives, because these type of tasks are likely to encourage learners to seek opportunities for comprehensible input and output.

The aim of this paper is to compare a task carried out individually and cooperatively to analyse if classroom interaction provides learners with opportunities for language learning.

METHODOLOGY

a) Participants

For this study we have paid attention to 11 children attending ESO (Compulsory Secondary Education = CSE) in the school.

Seven from these children attend 1st ESO and four attend 2nd ESO. Their ages are 12 and 13 years old, and there are six girls and five boys.

b) Conditions

The subjects in this study have in general terms the same beginner knowledge based on their 3 hour-weekly English class at school. Apart from this, they attend the classes I teach (English as an out of school activity), which take place two hours per week on Monday and Wednesday from 19-20 p.m.

Some of these children attend these classes because they like English, so in some way they are motivated. Others attend English classes because they need some support, as it is a foreign language.

The study was carried out two different Mondays with two weeks in the middle.

c) Material

I designed two short texts. Both texts were designed in a similar well-organized structure paying attention to two grammatical structures: present simple and present continuous. Therefore, in both texts appeared verbs which had to take the final -s (mark of present simple in the third person of singular), but there were also in both texts some verbs which had to take -es (go-goes, teach-teaches, watch-watches). Moreover, there was also one verb in present continuous (are eating, are playing) for each text. (See Appendix for both texts).

Both texts were especially designed for this study taking into account their beginner-level of English, and the length of them was nearly the same: the first text, which was carried out individually, had 41 words, and the second text carried out in pairs had 45 words.

d) Procedure:

On the first Monday I told the students to pay a lot of attention to the text I was going to read because they had to rewrite it. I read it (see Appendix: Text I) aloud twice in order to make them feel more secure about it. Then, I asked them to write what they remembered taking into account that it had to be a text with meaning. Finally, I collected the eleven texts.

Two weeks later, I grouped them in pairs. I organized the pairs on purpose, taking into account their level of English. As they were 11 students, I decided to work with 4 pairs and 1 group of three. In each pair, there was a boy and a girl (in the group of three, there were two girls and a boy). Once I had all the students organized, I told them that I was going to read another text and they had to write it down on their sheets of paper. I reminded them that we had done the same task two weeks before, but this time they had to do it in pairs and not individually. As I wanted to rewrite their interaction when doing the activity, I gave them an extra activity, which they had to do while I was with each pair. Therefore, I read the text (See Appendix: Text II) aloud only once for the whole class. Then, I went to each pair and I read the text a second time. In this way I could be with each one of the pairs, while the others were doing another activity.

RESULTS

Results from this very small-scale study suggest that they perform the activity better when working cooperatively than when working individually. An important finding is that the number of words increase considerably in the texts they write when performing the task in pairs. However, our initial purpose was to see if they interacted in a way that they put the grammatical forms of present simple (-s) and present continuous (-ing) in a correct way, and what we find in our analysis of the different interactions is that the students pay more attention to content words, such as: restaurant, teacher, bank, etc. than to grammatical points.

In order to comment all the results, we have provided the five different transcriptions to see which items do they negotiate during their interactions.

Transcription 1: (one pair) A: boy - 1st ESO B: girl - 2nd ESO

A: and he is to work, no?

B: no lo sé, creo que no, creo que él va a trabajar: going.

A: pero no ha dicho going

B: ya, pero es él va: go ...

A: y ella trabaja, no?

B: sí, en una escuela

A: ah! sí!

B: school

A: ¿y él?

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B: en un banco: he work in a bank

A: yo me acuerdo que al final es restaurante.

B: sí, a las 2 en un restaurant: they are eating in a restaurant.

In this first transcription, we find that there is not interaction at all over grammatical aspects. The only important points for them are the lexical words.

Transcription 2: (one pair) A: boy - 1st ESO B: girl - 1st ESO

A: Today is Sunday.

B: no, ha dicho Monday. Él va a trabajar.

A: he go ... work

B: no, es: **he goes, con -s.**

A: ¿y ella? ella es maestra, ¿no?

B: sí, she is teacher.

A: ah! y me acuerdo que enseña inglés

B: sí, English in the school

A: comen en...

B: sí, en un restaurante (asking to the teacher) **en es ¿“at” o “in”?** (the teacher does not answer). Bueno, pues ponemos “in”: in the restaurant.

In this second transcription, we see again that most of the interaction deals with lexical words, although there is also one comment about the present simple (he goes) and a clear doubt about the prepositions “in” and “at”, which the student prefers to ask directly to the teacher and not to her partner.

Transcription 3: (group of three) A: girl - 2nd ESO B: boy - 2nd ESO C: girl - 1st ESO

A: Tom, ¿qué más?

B: se levanta

A: ah! sí, ...

C: yo me acuerdo de school. Ella trabaja en una school.

A: eso va después.

B: ahora va: Tom always get up ...

A: **con -s. Tom always gets up...**

B: es verdad. **Con -s.**

A: ... and he goes work.

C: ¿dónde trabajaba?

B: en un banco.

A: sí, en un banco: bank. He works in a bank.

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C: y ¿el restaurante?

A: al final. Ahora va: she teaches English in a school.

B: ah! sí. She is teacher.

A: sí. His girlfriend is teacher in a school.

C: ¿y el restaurante?

A: ahora: they are dinner in a restaurant.

With this new interaction, we can see again the importance of content words such as: bank, restaurant, teacher, etc... However, there is another important interaction focusing on the grammatical aspect of the -s for the present simple in “he gets up”.

Transcription 4: (one pair) A: boy - 1st ESO B: girl - 2nd ESO

A: él va ...

B: sí, he goes to work.

A: en un banco. Él trabaja en un banco.

B: sí: he works in a bank.

A: y ella en un restaurante.

B: no. Ella es teacher, no trabaja en un restaurante.

A: es verdad: es maestra de inglés.

B: Sí, **she is teaching** English in a school.

A: es verdad: in a school, ¿y el restaurante?

B: eso al final: ellos comen in a restaurant

A: ah! sí, pero había otro número no?

B: sí, pero no me acuerdo: now, they are eating in a restaurant.

In this fourth interaction, we can conclude the same as in the previous ones. However, here they have written something that was not in the original text: “she is teaching” instead of writing “she teaches”. Therefore, we can say that they have paid attention again to the content meaning of the verb “teach” and not to the form, because it had to be in present simple and not in present continuous.

Transcription 5: (one pair) A: boy - 1st ESO B: girl - 2nd ESO

A: ¿al principio no era algo de Monday?

B: sí, es: Today is Monday. Tom era el nombre de él.

A: sí, Tom get up...

B: a las 7: at seven o'clock

A: sí, y trabaja en un banco: bank

B: no, con la otra K: es bank.

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A: ah! y ella es maestra.

B: sí, ella es teacher in the school.

A: ¿y el restaurante?

B: they eat in the restaurant.

Finally, in this last transcription we can see that there is an interaction over a content word: bank (this is written with “k” and not with “c”). However, there is no interaction at all over grammatical aspects, and in fact, they have not written any of the verbs with the -s of the present simple.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

In this study we have found that when working in pairs, the students have written longer texts with more information than the ones they wrote working individually. As suggested by Pica (1994) students negotiate more on lexical items than over grammatical morphology. Taking into consideration that we have carried out a very small-scale study, we should point out that the results are only orientative and no conclusive. It is important to bear in mind that we have worked with children (a beginner level of English). As Williams (1999:617) states, learners focus, above all things, on words, and if they are beginning learners even more, because they do not have the enough competence in the L2 to focus on form.

Therefore, further studies should be done taking into consideration that the election of a communicative task is very important in order to create an interactive situation where negotiation and feedback help to acquire language. Moreover, more attention to negotiate on form should be emphasized as researchers such as Storch (1998,1999) or Williams (1999) have done.

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APPENDIX

TEXT I

Today it is Saturday. Sam always gets up at ten o'clock and watches TV. He likes sports very much. At two o'clock he eats and then, he visits his friend John. They go to the park. Now, they are playing football.

TEXT II

Today it is Monday. Tom always gets up at seven o'clock and he goes to work. He works in a bank. Mary, his girlfriend, is a teacher. She teaches English in a school. Now, it is two o'clock and they are eating in a restaurant.