Collaborative Language Learning

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The term collaborate means to share labor (co-labor) and hence collaborative language learning is often taken to mean assigning students to work in pairs (or small groups) on language tasks. The use of pair work in second language (L2) classrooms has grown in recent years. Pair work is deemed to provide learners with more opportunities to use the target language and thus accords with communicative approaches to language instruction. Pair work is also supported by most of the current theories informing second language acquisition research. For example, in Long’s (1996) interaction hypothesis, interaction is seen as the means of making L2 input more comprehensible and thus facilitating L2 learning. In Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, the development of all higher order cognitive skills (including language learning) is said to emerge in social interaction (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

However, despite the widespread use and support for pair work in L2 classes, as students and teachers we have all probably experienced and observed pairs who do not seem to work well. Indeed one of the underlying assumptions in assigning students to work in pairs is that learners will collaborate rather than function merely as two individuals working autonomously in close proximity. Another related assumption is that the nature of the relationship that pairs form has no influence on language learning outcomes. Recent research findings suggest that not all pairs collaborate and that it is collaborative pair work that is conducive to language learning.

One of the first studies to consider the relational aspects of learner interaction was by Donato (1994). In his investigation of the relationships foreign-language learners formed when working in small groups, Donato distinguished between what he termed “collective groups” and “loosely knit groups.” Some of the defining characteristics of collective groups included frequent requests for mutual assistance, which Donato termed “collective scaffolding,” and a cohesive discourse pattern that was often indistinguishable from that of an individual speaker.

Building on Donato’s work, Storch (2002, 2009) observed and recorded the talk of the same pairs of tertiary English as a second language (ESL) learners working on different tasks over a semester. Based on her data, Storch established a model of dyadic interactions with two intersecting continua (see Figure 1). The horizontal continuum reflects the learners’ level of contribution and control over the task and ranges from low to high equality. The vertical continuum reflects the learners’ level of engagement with each other’s contribution and is thus termed mutuality. High mutuality describes interactions that are rich in reciprocal feedback and a sharing of ideas. At the other end, low mutuality reflects lack of engagement with each other’s suggestions. The two intersecting continua form four quadrants, representing four distinct patterns of pair relations.

Pairs who display a collaborative orientation reside in the top half of the model, in quadrants 1 and 4. In quadrant 1, the pattern of interaction is truly collaborative: both equality and mutuality are relatively high. That is, both members of the pair contribute to the task and engage with each other’s suggestion. The kind of assistance offered is bidirectional, with both learners offering assistance to each other or pooling their linguistic resources (collective scaffolding) to reach resolutions. In quadrant 4, the pattern is labeled
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expert/novice and reflects a tutor/tutee relationship. In such pairs, one learner takes a leading role but at the same time provides the kind of support and encouragement usually provided by the teacher.

The lower half of the model represents noncollaborative patterns of interaction. Quadrant 2 represents a pattern of interaction where there may be moderate to high equality, but a relatively low level of mutuality. In such pairs, both members of the pair contribute to the task but do not engage with each other’s suggestion. This may occur either because the learners wrestle for control of the task or are unwilling to engage with each other’s suggestion (a relationship labeled “dominant/dominant” in Storch, 2002, 2009), or both of these, or instances where the pair cooperate rather than collaborate. That is, the learners simply divide the task between themselves, with each participant focusing only on their part of the task.

Quadrant 3 represents a dominant/passive pattern. The dominant participant in such dyads takes control of the task and completes the task as if on his or her own. The other participant adopts a more passive, subservient role. There is little interaction in such patterns because there are few contributions, questions, or challenges forthcoming from the more passive participant.

Excerpt 1 comes from the data of Storch (2002, 2009) and is an example of the type of interaction found in collaborative pairs. The two participants contribute jointly to the task and engage constructively with their own and each other’s suggestions. They engage in what Swain (2006) refers to as “languaging”: using language to make meaning and to deliberate about the language used. In Excerpt 1, we see evidence of learners using language to co-construct ideas by building and elaborating on each other’s utterances (e.g., turns 2–9) and by seeking and providing mutual assistance (e.g., turns 19–20). Once ideas are formulated the learners engage with the utterances produced. There is corrective feedback in the form of explicit peer repair (e.g., turn 15) or recasting (e.g., turn 6) as well as positive feedback in the form of confirmations (e.g., turns 9, 10). There is also evidence of pooling resources, or collective scaffolding (Donato, 1994). In turn 16, the pauses suggest

**Figure 1** A model of dyadic interaction © Neomy Storch
that Mai may be searching for an appropriate verb. Charley suggests a verb (show) but then Mai notes a problem with subject verb agreement and Charley provides the appropriate correction.

Excerpt 1: Illustration of collaboration (Quadrant 1 in Figure 1)
2 Mai: From the chart
3 Charley: This chart about
4 Mai: The data
5 Charley: With percentage and ah . . .
6 Mai: Describe describe the percentage of
7 Charley: English language fluency
8 Mai: English language fluency between two countries yeah? Vietnam and Laos
9 Charley: Yes and compare before they came here and now
10 Mai: Yes
11 Charley: You can separate it here
12 Mai: Yeah . . . first we . . . mm the
13 Charley: Perhaps you should write
14 Mai: Yeah I write yeah from the information of the chart yeah . . . [writing] information of the chart
15 Charley: No from figure 3
16 Mai: Ah figure . . . figure 3? From figure 3 . . . figure 3 ah
17 Charley: Show the information
18 Mai: Show the information . . . it it’s
19 Charley: Yeah it’s ok it shows . . . the data or the percentage?
20 Mai: Should be the percentage

It is important to note that collaboration is different from cooperation. Excerpt 2 comes from the data collected by Tan who compared the nature of pair work in face to face and via computer mediated interaction in a class of adult learners of Chinese as a L2 (see Tan, Wigglesworth, & Storch, 2010). As can be observed in Excerpt 2, although both Jan and Ben contribute to the task (a short composition), there is little engagement in each other’s suggestions and very little evidence of feedback or of a pooling of resources. That is, there is no evidence of languaging or the type of cohesive, collaborative dialogue evident in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 2: Illustration of cooperation (Quadrant 2 in Figure 1)
7 Jan: Do you want to start?
   Is our student studying at Moerben daxue?
   [Melbourne University]
8 Ben: dui ta jiudian chi zaofan
   [Yes, he eats breakfast at 9 o’clock]
These different patterns of dyadic interaction have since been reported in a number of studies in different contexts. For example, Ives (2004) found evidence of collaborative, expert/novice, and expert/passive patterns of interaction in a primary L2 class where grade 6 learners were paired with native-English-speaking children. Aldosari (2008), in a study conducted in an English as a foreign language (EFL) class (Saudi Arabia) where learners were paired according to their L2 proficiency, found more evidence of collaboration in pairs of equal proficiency (high-high and low-low) than in pairs where learners had different proficiency (high-low). Kim and McDonough (2008), in a study conducted in South Korea with learners of Korean as a second language, also reported different patterns of pair interaction depending on whether the learner worked with an interlocutor of the same or with a higher L2 proficiency level. However, L2 proficiency level may not be the sole reason explaining why learners form different patterns of interaction. Storch (2004) suggested that collaboration can best be explained by reference to individuals’ goals and attitudes to the activity of pair work. These goals and attitudes are in turn shaped by an individual’s history of language learning and by cultural backgrounds. Collaboration is most likely to occur when both members of the pair share goals and view the activity and the contribution of each member as valuable.

Given that learners are likely to form different patterns of interaction when assigned to work in pairs, the important question to consider is whether these patterns have implications for language learning. As Excerpt 1 shows, collaborative dialogue is rich in language learning opportunities. That is, when learners collaborate they deliberate about language use: they provide suggestions, countersuggestions, explanations, and feedback to each other. A number of studies (e.g., Storch, 2002, 2009; Watanabe & Swain, 2007; Kim & McDonough, 2008; Tan et al., 2010) have reported more evidence of deliberations about language in the data of pairs who collaborated than in noncollaborative pairs. Thus these studies suggest that collaborative pair work provides greater potential for language learning than non-collaborative pair work.

A small number of studies have also shown direct links between the nature of dyadic interaction and language learning outcomes. Storch (2002, 2009) traced for the presence of linguistic items over which the learners deliberated in the pair talk appearing in the learners’ subsequent individual production. She found such evidence in the data of the collaborative pair and in the expert/novice pair more so than in the noncollaborative pairs. Watanabe and Swain (2007), using a pre-/posttest design, found greater evidence of learning in the data of pairs who collaborated than in those who exhibited a noncollaborative orientation.

The nature of interaction has been found to have an impact not only on language learning outcomes but also on test performance outcomes. For example, Galazi (2008), who studied the interactional patterns of pairs of candidates in the First Certificate in English test, reported that pairs who exhibited a collaborative orientation achieved higher scores than those who interacted in a cooperative pattern.

In language classrooms, which are essentially social events (Block, 1996), interactions between participants may have multiple meanings and in turn different language learning outcomes. As a growing number of studies have shown, not all pair work qualifies as
collaborative, and some dyadic patterns may be counterproductive. A greater awareness and understanding of the nature of collaboration is therefore important in order to enhance the learning opportunities pair work offers language learners.

SEE ALSO: Interaction Approach in Second Language Acquisition; Languaging: Collaborative Dialogue as a Source of Second Language Learning; Sociocultural Theory

References


Suggested Readings

