

EFL/ESL Learners' Language Related Episodes (LREs) during Performing Collaborative Writing Tasks

Seyed Yasin Yazdi Amirkhiz (Corresponding Author)

Department of Language and Humanities Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

Kamariah Abu Bakar

Institute for Mathematical Research, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Arshad Abd. Samad

Department of Language and Humanities Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Roselan Baki

Department of Language and Humanities Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Leila Mahmoudi

Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, Universiti Malaya, Malaysia

Abstract—This paper examined how the homogeneous dyads-- two EFL (i.e. Iranian) dyads and two ESL (i.e., Malaysian) dyads--consciously reflected on their language in the course of performing collaborative writing tasks. To this end, the dyads were asked to do fifteen writing tasks collaboratively. The pair talk was audio-recorded and transcribed for each dyad. It was revealed that EFL/ESL dyads had different orientations towards metatalk; EFL dyads tended to focus considerably more on meta-linguistic features of language than ESL dyads. The findings are discussed with a reference to the different status of the English language in the two contexts of Iran and Malaysia (i.e., EFL vs. ESL) as well as the effect of previous educational experiences of the learners. The findings of the study could be of pedagogical help and significance to educationists and practitioners.

Index Terms—language-related episodes, EFL/ESL, collaborative writing

I. INTRODUCTION

Applying Vygotskian perspective to L2 learning, Swain (2000) extended her concept of output hypothesis (Swain, 1995; Swain, Gass, & Madden, 1985) and proposed the notion of collaborative dialogue. Collaborative dialogue is the dialogue in which “learners work together to solve linguistic problems and/or co-construct language or knowledge about language (Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002, p. 172). Swain (2000, p.51) recommends “conscious focus on language from” in contexts in which the learners are engaged in the process of meaning making or natural communication. In order to further emphasize the significance of output and producing language during collaborative engagements, Swain (2006, 2010) proposed the concept of languaging. She believes that languaging mediates both internalizing and externalizing psychological activity. According to her, under such circumstances in which learners are required to produce language, besides certain pedagogical gains (e.g., noticing the gap), the language produced is also made available for analysis and reflection by the researchers. Language Related Episodes (LREs) have been used as a measurement and analysis tool to such an end. LREs are segments of collaborative dialogue where the collaborators deliberate about language (lexical choices, grammar, and mechanics) while trying to perform the task (Swain & Lapkin, 2001). Based on Swain and Lapkin's (2002) extended definition of LREs, “LREs are a group of utterances or any segment of dialog in which the group members are talking about the language they have produced or are producing, correct themselves or others, or question or reflect on their language use.”

II. REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

A number of researchers have investigated upon the description of collaborative dynamics among the peers while doing group writing. For example, some studies (Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Nelson & Murphy,

1992) have shown that L2 learners reflect on different aspects of a text when they do joint writing; they discuss a variety of textual issues. Nelson and Murphy (1992) found that in the course of peer response activities ESL learners focused most of their verbal interactions on the task. According to them, 70% -80% of the utterances exchanged were related to “the analysis of word order, rhetorical organization, lexical ties, cohesive devices, style, and usage” (p. 187). Mendonca and Johnson (1994) who conducted their study with six ESL dyads found that in the course of peer-response activities the learners spoke primarily about language issues such as vocabulary, and more global discourse issues such as essay organization.

Investigating the effect of task type on the collaboration process, Storch's (1997) study showed that in a peer-editing activity the focus of ESL learners' discussion was more on language-related issues, particularly grammatical choices, rather than on discussing ideas. The study indicated that the type of the collaborative task (e.g., editing task) may affect the kinds of text issues that collaborators discuss. Storch's (2005) classroom-based study of nine dyads who were asked to collaboratively describe a graphic prompt showed that the learners focused a considerable share of the total time (53%) on idea generation (ideational aspects) followed by language issues (25%). Lockhart and Ng (1995) likewise reported that in their peer-response study a bigger proportion of verbal interactions was dedicated to discussing ideational aspects. Building on the earlier works of Storch (2001) and Swain and Lapkin (2001), De la Colina and Garcia Mayo (2007) compared LREs generated by the learners in the course of completing three different kinds of tasks: jigsaw, text reconstruction and dictogloss. Unlike earlier studies (i.e., Storch and Swain and Lapkin's studies), de la Colina and Garcia Mayo's study was conducted in an EFL context (Spain) and with low-proficiency L2 learners. The study indicated that different task types could differently draw learners' attention to language. Text reconstruction task which is a more structured task compared to jigsaw and dictogloss elicited more LREs from the learners.

Storch and Wigglesworth (2007) compared the LREs generated by two types of meaning-focused writing tasks: (a data commentary report vs. an argumentative essay) among advanced level English learners. The study found that learners had more lexical LREs than grammar-focused LREs. The researchers attributed the learners' higher degree of attention to lexical choices (rather than to accuracy) to the meaning-focused nature of the tasks used in the study as well as the participants' advanced level of proficiency.

The L2 proficiency of learners has been seen as another important factor that can affect the quantity and quality of the LREs. Williams' (1999, 2001) studies are reckoned among the early studies examining the effect of proficiency on the LREs. She investigated whether English L2 learners from different proficiency levels differed in terms of the occurrence and the resolution of LREs during collaborative activities. Analyzing the collaborative negotiations of eight learners from four proficiency levels (beginning, intermediate, high-intermediate and advanced) indicated that the learners tended to discuss lexical items more often than grammatical items, and the overall rate of occurrence of LREs increased as the proficiency of the participants increased. The study also found that learners from higher proficiency levels may be more likely to have more metatalk and to reach more correct resolutions to their linguistic problems during collaborative engagements compared to their less proficient counterparts.

Leeser (2004) similarly investigated the effect of proficiency on the occurrence and the outcome of the LREs in an EFL context (i.e., Spain). Ten L2 learners were assigned into five dyads; two of the dyads included pairs of high proficiency (two high-high); two of the dyads included pairs of low proficiency (two low-low). The other dyad was a mixed proficiency dyad (high-low). All the dyads were asked to complete a dictogloss task collaboratively. The pair talk of the participants' was analyzed for the number and type of LREs (i.e., lexical or grammar-based) as well as their resolution. The results of the study showed that the grouping of learners according to their proficiency level affected not only the number of the LREs they produced, but also the types of LREs they focused on, as well as the outcome of the LREs.

Building on Leeser's work, subsequent studies looked into the effect of proficiency on the generation of LREs as well as the relationship that the learners formed when working in pairs of similar or mixed proficiency. In an interesting research design, Watanabe and Swain (2007) sought to find out whether the occurrence of LREs differed when the same four English learners of their study interacted with peers of lower and higher language proficiency. The study showed that the learners produced more LREs when they interacted with a high-level interlocutor. In a similar study, Kim and McDonough (2008) paired eight intermediate Korean L2 learners with fellow intermediate learners and then with advanced interlocutors to complete a dictogloss task. The researchers found that the number of LREs produced were higher when the learners interacted with advanced interlocutors rather than intermediate ones; also, a greater proportion of these LREs were lexical.

Aldosari (2008) in his doctoral research which was carried out in an EFL context sought to investigate the effect of proficiency, task type and relationships learners formed on the quantity and the type of LREs that collaborative writing tasks elicited. Three types of tasks were used in the study: jigsaw, composition and editing. The researcher, based on the EFL instructor's assessment of students' level of proficiency, put the participants into pairs of high-high, high-low, and low-low. The findings of the study showed that the task type affected the type of LREs generated between the learners; whereas the tasks of more meaning-oriented nature (jigsaw and composition) elicited more learners' attention to lexis, the editing task (a task of less meaning-oriented nature) generated more grammar-based LREs. The study also found that the role of relationship formed between the interlocutors could be more important than the effect of proficiency.

The number of LREs was higher in collaborative pairs than in pairs with asymmetrical patterns of interaction (dominant-passive or expert-novice).

Overall, the above reviews show that all the studies have addressed the study of LREs among either ESL or EFL learners, and a study has yet to be conducted to comparatively investigate the occurrence of LREs among ESL and EFL learners. This study is a small attempt in this direction, being crystallized around the following research question:

What are the Language Related Episodes (LREs) of Iranian (EFL) and Malaysian (ESL) learners like in the course of collaborative writing sessions?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The study included 4 female Malaysian and 4 female Iranian students at a private university in Kuala Lumpur. These participants, who were selected from among about twenty students, met certain selection criteria: 1. An attempt was made to choose the participants from similar disciplines. 2. Their most recent English proficiency test result (IELTS) was used for proficiency level judgment. A writing proficiency test adapted from IELTS (IELTS Academic Module task 1) was also administered to them to be further assured of their homogeneity of writing proficiency. All the participants' score for the IELTS Academic Module writing task 1 was 6, and 3. In addition to their proficiency level, the participants' gender was considered as one of the selection criteria as well because according to Chavez (2000) and Gass and Varonis (1986), sex of interactants could affect the interaction and group dynamics.

The 8 participants were divided into 4 dyads (the smallest formation of a group): 2 Malaysian dyads and 2 Iranian dyads. The Iranian dyads were named dyad A and dyad B, and the Malaysian dyads were named dyads C and D.

B. Instrumentation

In order to scrutinize the verbal interactions (Process) of the participants, it was necessary to elicit, record, transcribe and analyze the pair talk of Iranian dyads and Malaysian dyads. For the purpose of output elicitation, task 1 of IELTS Academic Module was utilized. Swain and her colleagues (Kowal & Swain, 1994; Swain, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1998) have proposed the use of tasks which require collaborative written output as a means of drawing learners' attention to meta-linguistic features within a communicative context. The reason could be the function of collaborative writing in encouraging "learners to language, that is, to reflect on language use in the process of producing language" (Storch, 2011, p. 277). Some researchers (Adams & Ross-Feldman, 2008; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Swain, et al., 2002; J. Williams, 2008) basically consider writing essential for language learning on the grounds that writing is more likely to encourage learners to reflect on their language use in the process of producing language.

C. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection took place within the semester break of second semester in 2010. At the outset of the study, the general aim of the study was explained to the participants. Data collection took place in fifteen sessions and lasted about 6 weeks. In each session the four dyads of the study were provided with the same graphic prompt (IELTS Academic Module task 1) and were asked to collaboratively perform the tasks in not more than thirty minutes. The verbal interactions taking place between the peers in each dyad were recorded for the later analysis. It is worth mentioning that each dyad chose a time convenient for them to meet; therefore, data collection took place at different times for the dyads.

D. Data Analysis

The pair talk data from eleven collaborative sessions (out of fifteen sessions) was transcribed for each of the dyads. Pair talks of sessions one, five, six and fifteen were not transcribed. Session one was deliberately excluded from transcription because it was the beginning session, and despite explanations provided by the researcher, the participants did not seem to have a sufficient familiarity with the procedure of performing the task. Pair talk of session five was not transcribed because the pair talk of dyad C had not been recorded by the device. The interactive discourse of session six for dyad B was not audible enough because of the background noise (construction work), so transcription was not carried out. The last session (session fifteen) was not transcribed because one of the members of dyad B, who had gone back her country, did not attend. The reason behind having an equal number of collaborative session for all the dyads was to accurately quantify and reflect the linguistic features of the participants' collaborative discourse within the equal number of sessions. It is important to note that as about 75% of the whole data set (i.e., eleven sessions) was transcribed, the researcher had some concerns about the adequacy of this amount of data transcription. Therefore, a well-known authority in qualitative research (i.e., Merriam, 2011) was requested to comment on. She pointed out that "This large data set [transcribed pair talk of 11 sessions] generated by the eight participants is more than enough data to address the study's research questions" (personal correspondence).

As stated above, in this study an LRE was defined as any part of collaborative discourse in which the peers talked about language they were producing or had produced, and the corrections they made to their own language or their partner's. For the purpose of coding the transcripts for language related episodes, the researcher read and re-read all the transcripts. After establishing the codes, inter-rater and intra-rater reliability was checked. In order to check inter-rater

reliability, eight randomly selected transcripts (over a third of the entire data) were coded by a PhD student of TESL. Inter-rater reliability averaged 83%. The researcher was initially concerned about the level of inter-rater reliability as it was below the figure of 90% recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994). However, reading through the literature indicated that the reliability scores between 80% and 90% have been recognized to be the norm in the studies dealing with the interactive discourse (e.g., Brooks, Donato, & McGlonem, 1997; Cumming, 1989). Intra-rater reliability was taken care of as well. In order to check the intra-rater reliability, eight transcripts were randomly selected and were coded again about ten days after the initial coding. The figure averaged 92%.

IV. FINDINGS

Three types of LREs were found in the specified transcribed data: Form-oriented LRE (FO-LRE), Lexis-oriented LRE (LO-LRE), and Mechanics-oriented LRE (MO-LRE). A few examples are provided below.

a) Form-oriented LREs (FO-LRE)

In the present study, any segment in the collaborative discourse of the peers dealing with grammatical accuracy was categorized as Form-oriented LRE. The episodes dealing with form and tense of the verb, the articles, prepositions, linking devices and word order fall in the category of FO-LREs. Some examples from the Form-oriented LREs in the pair talk data of the dyads are presented:

Excerpt 16: An FO-LRE dealing with the tense of a verb
 143 Negar: Start from 10 there is an increasing in number of people the number of passengers who use underground station...
 144 Niloofar: Who use?!
 145 Negar: Yes, number of passengers who use...yes...
 146 Negar: 'Who use' is correct or 'who is using?' What do you think?
 147 Niloofar: 'Who use' is correct...I think
 148 Negar: Ok. 'who use'
 [Dyad B, Task B, L 143-148]

Excerpt 17: An FO-LRE dealing with the tense of a verb
 31 Niloofar: ...in 2005 there are less than...
 32 Negar: In 2005 there were.....
 [Dyad B, Task A, L 31-32]

b) Lexis-Oriented LREs (LO-LRESs)

Those segments in the protocol of the collaborative discourse which were dealing with word choice, word's meaning, or alternative ways of expressing an idea were categorized as Lexis-Oriented LREs.

Excerpt 21: An LO-LRE dealing with the choice of a word
 176 Niloofar: It means the chance of...
 177 Negar: having job...
 178 Niloofar: finding job...
 179 Negar: Why finding?...having job is better
 180 Niloofar: having is not chance...finding is chance
 [Dyad B, Task A, L 176-180]

c) Mechanics-Oriented LREs (MO-LREs)

LREs dealing with spelling, pronunciation, and punctuation were categorized as Mechanics-oriented LREs. The following LREs exemplify MO-LREs:

Excerpt 22: An MO-LRE dealing with punctuation
 302 Negar: so this... here we can just use full-stop...full-stop doesn't need 'and'
 [Dyad, B, Task C, L 302]

Excerpt 23: An MO-LRE dealing with punctuation
 199 Mei: So, we just put a full stop there?
 200 Teng: Ok. Yup.
 [Dyad C, Task B, L 199-200]

Excerpt 24: An MO-LRE dealing with spelling
 125 Niloofar: Ok...It's abvi.....spelling of 'obvious'...Oh my God, I forget the spelling
 124 Negar: 'O'... It starts with 'O'
 [Dyad B, Task A, L124-125]

LREs in the transcripts were analyzed for grammar, lexis and mechanics. The quantified values pertinent to the nature of metatalk (LREs) are presented for each dyad below.

TABLE 1:
TYPE AND FREQUENCY OF LRES FOR THE DYADS

Frequency \ Type	Grammar	Lexis	Mechanics	Total
Dyad A	71	91	14	176
Dyad B	93	96	23	212
Dyad C	45	62	16	123
Dyad D	39	51	12	102

V. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS FOR LRES

The results of this study indicate that the Malaysian and Iranian learners of equal language proficiency had different orientations towards metatalk (see Table 4-15). Iranians tended to focus considerably more on meta-linguistic features of language as opposed to their Malaysian counterparts. Such a tendency among Malaysian participants was reported by Shahkarami (2011) as well. His study found that Malaysian learners “paid more attention to the communicative aspect of language and cared less about the language forms” (pp.124-25).

In the present study with everything almost equal among the dyads (e.g. gender, age, language proficiency), the two possible explanations for the LRE discrepancy between Iranian and Malaysian participants could be the different status of the English language in the two contexts of Iran and Malaysia as well as the effect of previous educational experiences of the learners.

As far as the status of the English language in the two contexts of Iran and Malaysia is concerned, Malaysian participants came from a background where English carries a high instrumental value and as Baker (2008, p. 132) states English in Malaysia-along with the two countries of India and the Philippines- “is used as an institutionalized additional language” and is considered a second language. However, in Iran English is considered a foreign language (Yarmohammadi, 2005) and does not have the communicational function it does in Malaysia. Not to mention that it is hardly used in the context of Iranian society.

It is a truism to say that English has permeated the very fabric of Malaysian society and is seen as a handy communicational means rather than a set of complicated grammar rules to be mastered. Shahkarami’s (2011) study found that “Neither accuracy nor fluency seemed to be important to them [Malaysian students]; the only important part of the language was its ability to connect them to others for effortless communication” (p.125). However, the most important channel for learning English in Iran is through the structure-based English curriculum at schools. Therefore, it seems reasonable to believe that due to the Iranian students’ long-time exposure to the structure-based English education as well as the lack of authentic environmental contexts for using the language for communicative purposes, Iranian students are unconsciously more inclined to structural aspects of language rather than the communicative dimensions of language. Such an argumentation is supported by the participants’ English learning histories.

As said in the preceding chapter, despite certain similarities, the Malaysian and Iranian participants of the present study had different English learning histories. As far as the areas of focus in their language classes were concerned, Malaysian participants said in their English classes language teaching focused on the four skills of language (reading, writing, listening, speaking) as well grammar and vocabulary. For example, Gin said, “in high schools, we were taught to write an essay. Also, we had reading. We were tested on listening and oral skill aside from paper-based exam.” Teng stated that in some of their English classes the students were encouraged to converse in English and those who broke the rule had to pay the penalty.

However, Iranian participants unanimously stated that the focus of instruction in their English classes was on grammar exercises, vocabulary and translation from English (L2) into Persian (L1). The focus of the textbooks was grammar, vocabulary and reading. For example, Negar alluded to the negative washback effect of the National University Entrance Exam (NUEE) on teaching and stated that the focus in the English section of the NUEE is on vocabulary, grammar and reading; therefore, all teachers as well as students are excessively obsessed with grammar and vocabulary, and accordingly the focus of the classes is on these language components. Niloofar made the point that seldom was there any attention to conversation in her classes and vocabulary items were mostly presented to the students with their L1 equivalents on the board. Eslami-Rasekh and Valizadeh (2004) and Mahmoudi and Yazdi (2011) have reported similar findings about areas of focus in English classes of Iran’s educational system.

Thus, based on the foregoing, the learners’ English learning histories along with the socio-contextual status of the English language in Malaysia and Iran sound two possible explanations for Iranians’ form-focused and Malaysians’ communication-focused tendencies. Concerning the importance of prior experiences and socio-contextual variables, Watson-Gegeo (1992) asserted that “Participants in an interaction always bring with them previous experiences and learning shaped by a variety of institutional practices in the family, school, community and nation” (p.253).

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study indicated that learners possessing a similar level of proficiency, but with different cultural background and English learning histories could come up with totally discrepant sets of LREs. Therefore, the

universalistic perception that learners of similar proficiency dealing with the identical tasks generate more or less similar patterns of LREs was challenged in the present study.

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Seyed Yasin Yazdi Amirkhiz is a PhD student of TESL at University Putra Malaysia (UPM). His fields of interest include philosophy of language and language teaching methodologies.

Kamariah Abu Bakar is a professor of education at University Putra Malaysia. She has taught specialized courses at BA, MA and PhD levels, and has also supervised a large number of MA theses and PhD dissertations. Professor Abu Bakar has published many articles in national and international journals.

Arshad Abd. Samad is an associate professor in the Department of Language and Humanities Education at University Putra Malaysia. His main research interests include Grammar Instruction, Second language acquisition, and language testing and assessment.

Roselan Baki is a senior lecturer in the Department of Language and Humanities Education at University Putra Malaysia. His research focuses on alternative pedagogy, quality teaching and classroom research.

Leila Mahmoudi is a PhD student of Applied Linguistics at University of Malaya (UM). Her main research interests are language assessment, language teaching methodologies, and linguistics.