

The Role of Learner-Learner Interaction in the Development of Speaking Skills

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Abstract—The present study investigated the role of learner-learner interaction in the development of speaking skills of 52 international postgraduate students who enrolled in an intensive English course at the language center at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) after they failed in English Language Placement Test (ELPT) at the point of entry to the university. A quantitative research method was employed to examine the role of learner-learner interaction in the development of speaking skill of the language learners. The speaking skill of the participants was assessed before and immediately after the English course and, questionnaire was distributed among the participants to get a deeper insight about the role of learner-learner interaction in enhancing their speaking skill. The data gained were analysed through SPSS version 16.0 and were presented in the form of descriptive statistics which include percentages. Findings of the study indicated that learner-learner interaction played a significant role in the classroom since students were able to improve their speaking skill in the classroom atmosphere. The analysis also confirmed notable concern over employing learner-learner interaction instructions in the developing of speaking skill. The pedagogical implications of the findings suggested the need to include communicative language teaching materials which help language learners practise language in the hope of improving their speaking abilities through the interactions that take place among language learners in the classroom.

Index Terms—learner-learner interaction, speaking skills, communicative language teaching materials

I. INTRODUCTION

The mastery of speaking skills in language has become a priority for many second or foreign language learners. Consequently, language learners often evaluate their success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their language course on the basis of how well they feel they have improved in their spoken language proficiency (Richards, 2005). Further, many researchers maintain that speaking is one of the four key and pivotal skills of language that should be developed since the ability to communicate effectively benefits L2 learners by gaining self-confidence and improve performance in the rest of the language skills (MacIntyre, 2007; Trent, 2009). In addition, the significance of mastering speaking skills of the target language arises when the language learners realize the impact it would have on the success of their future careers. Learners realize that they need to practise the target language regularly in the classroom in order to overcome shyness and hesitation (Taous, 2013).

The lack of interaction or the use of the language will negatively affect language learners in their communications. Therefore, language learners should be encouraged to participate in the acute interaction that takes place in the classroom so that they can be fluent and well-versed in spoken language (Mackey, 2007; Zucker, 2005).

It has been shown that for language learners to improve in their speaking skills, practising the language they are learning, in particular engaging in interactions that take place between learners in the classroom environment is important. In this type of interaction, teachers play as observers and facilitators and students are the major participants of the interaction (Tuan & Nhu, 2010). Interaction has stimulated a lot of research in the past in the field of second language acquisition. Long (1981), suggests that it is the interaction which simplifies comprehension and promotes second language acquisition, in particular speaking skills. In fact, the role of learner-learner interaction is of paramount importance as it paves away for learners to improve their language skills in general and speaking skills in particular and, according to Mackey (2007), classroom interaction provided by teachers can be lucrative for improving speaking skills.

In addition, learner-learner interaction can contribute to language development by the provision of interactive target language activities in the classroom that makes language learners use the language they are learning (Taous, 2013). In

this sense, learning a second or a foreign language can be facilitated when language learners are actively involved in interactive communications (Nunan, 1991). If language learners, however, do not practise the language they are studying, they will not be able to be fluent speakers, and therefore, this will affect their future career. Considering this issue, the current study seeks to investigate the role of learner-learner interaction in the development of speaking skills of language learners.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Importance of Speaking Skills

In the traditional methods of teaching language, the speaking skills had been neglected massively whereas much attention had been paid on writing and reading skills. The Grammar-Translation method is a good example of that claim. In spite of the fact that speaking skill is crucially important for language learners to converse and communicate, much attention has been paid to other elements of language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In addition, of all the four skills of language, speaking is seen as the most important skill because people who claim to know a language, they intend to claim that they are able to speak the language (Ur, 2000). Further, many language learners give preference to speaking skill since they believe that if they master the speaking skill, they are seen as speakers of the language. Most importantly, the main question that most language learners are asked about is “do you speak English?” not “do you write English?” Therefore, the vast majority of language learners attempt to focus on mastering the speaking skill, as they feel that this will assist them in finding jobs in their future careers. In this regard, Baker and Westrup (2003) argue that learners who can speak English fluently, might have greater chances for employment.

B. Long's (1981) Interaction Hypothesis

Long (1981), formulated the Interaction Hypothesis which forms the basic argument for the conversational interaction in language teaching and learning, in which language learners access to comprehensible input, opportunities for outcome and correction in the form of conversation among one another. According to the Interaction Hypothesis, language learners negotiate in meaning which is the process of engaging in interaction in order for learners to concentrate on form and process of the input they obtain. Thus, the Interaction Hypothesis suggests that interaction between a non-native speaker and a native speaker or among non-native speakers creates acute second/foreign language acquisition environment where learners learn through negotiation of meaning. Furthermore, research has shown that input alone is not as effective as interactional modified input in helping language teaching and learning (Ellis & Fotos, 1999; Gass & Varonis, 1994; Wang & Castro, 2010). Thus, the Interaction Hypothesis plays a central role in learning through conversational interaction on improving language learners' speaking skills.

C. Previous Studies on Learner-learner Interaction

A large body of research has been conducted in the field of second language acquisition to show how second language learning is learned through interaction, in particular learner-learner interaction. These studies have highlighted the important role of learner-learner interaction in the classroom in improving speaking skills of language learners. In one study, Lourduathan and Menon (2005) investigated how interaction strategy training affects group interaction in which students can develop their speaking skills. Ten groups of students were trained on the use of interaction strategies. The findings showed that training students based on interaction resulted in significant uses of interaction and therefore, they were able to improve their speaking ability through the course of training.

In another study, Cotter (2007) found that through practising the target language in verbal skills when comprehensible input and interaction are available through exchanging information and negotiation for meaning, L2 learners will see language as a tool for social interaction. The study further reaffirmed the notion that language must be used as a tool to gain distinct social aims like explaining how something works, to provide information and to entertain. Hence, learning English language is to improve the capacity to use it efficiently and successfully for some purposes and the ability to talk about the language being used.

In another study, Kouicem (2010) explored the role of interaction that takes place among students in the classroom on developing learners' speaking skills. The study adopted questionnaire among language learners and teachers to establish if interaction in classroom can be helpful in promoting speaking skills of students. The results of the study accentuated that both teachers and learners emphasized that interaction among students in the classroom setting helped learners in enhancing their speaking skills. The study also displayed that teaching based on interaction in the classroom can be the best pedagogical strategy in language development, in particular verbal language development.

Most recently, Luan and Sappathy (2011) investigated the role of negotiated interaction between learners on the ability to retain vocabulary items among a group of students. 48 students participated in the study in one-way input which involved the traditional way of teaching where the teacher used translations and grammar to teach vocabulary. 24 of the participants took part in an interactive task where the students experienced interactive activities. All the 48 students sat for a pretest and three posttests. The results of the study presented that the students who negotiated in the two-way task obtained higher vocabulary scores since negotiated interaction proved to be beneficial for students in retaining vocabulary items. In short, research has generally shown that teaching methods in which interactive activities are involved have greater effect on the development of speaking skills of language learners.

III. METHODOLOGY

To conduct this study, a quantitative research method was adopted as quantitative research is basically about collecting numerical data to explain a particular phenomenon and particular questions seem suitable to be answered quantitatively (Creswell, 2012). Moreover, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) argue that quantitative method facilitates and enables researchers to obtain a broad understanding of a specific problem and the generalization of the findings can be made.

A. Participants

Participants of the study consisted of 52 international postgraduate students, mainly males, enrolled in an intensive English class at the Language Centre at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) during the time of the study. They were required to join an English course in order for them to develop their speaking skills after they failed in the pretest. The academic program continued for three and a half months in February semester 2013. The participants received 4 hours of speaking instructions class based on communicative language teaching approach at the center on a weekly basis. Furthermore, none of the participants had experienced living in a native English speaking environment. Therefore, they did not have any opportunity to improve their speaking skills before joining the class at the university. Moreover, the selection of the participants for the study was based on voluntary basis and were randomly selected. The participants of the study who were from eight different countries are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1:
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS FROM DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

Number	Country	Number of Respondents
1	Iraq	26
2	Yemen	1
3	Somalia	2
4	Algeria	2
5	Indonesia	1
6	Libya	4
7	Saudi Arabia	3
8	Jordan	13

B. Instruments

In order to answer the main research question of the present study, two instruments were used namely; speaking test results of ELPT Test One and Test Two (hereafter referred as pretest and posttest) and a questionnaire were used. Speaking skill results of pretest and posttest were taken to present the development of the learners' speaking skills in the classroom through learner-learner interaction during the course of the instructions at the Language Center. Furthermore, the questionnaire used in the study was adapted from Kouicem (2010) which mainly focuses on interaction in language development. The questionnaire consisted of 6 items, asking the learners to what extent they had improved their speaking skills through learner-learner interaction in the classroom environment. All the items were answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from never, rarely, sometimes, usually, to always with values 1 to 5 allocated to them respectively.

C. Procedure

Participants of the current study took a pretest at the point of entry to the university, and they then enrolled in an intensive English speaking skills course for three and a half months. By the end of the course, they were required to take a posttest to assess how they had improved their speaking skills throughout the intensive English course based on interactions that occurred in the classroom environment. Similarly, the questionnaire was distributed among the participants in the end of May 2013 to elicit the participants' perceptions about the role of learner-learner interaction on the development of speaking skills. The questionnaire was distributed in class, and the students were given 24 hours to answer the items of the questionnaire. The questionnaire sheets were collected personally by the next morning in the class for the purpose of data analysis. Prior to data collection, permission was sought from the individuals and the language center. Participants were also assured that the content will be confidential.

D. Data Analysis

Data from the two tests were analyzed statistically in order to show the improvement of the students' speaking skills in the posttest over the pretest. The results of the posttest were used to make a comparison with the pretest to present to what extent the students made a difference in their speaking skills ability through the interaction, especially the learner-learner interaction provided in the classroom. Likewise, the data from the questionnaire were analyzed through (SPSS), version 19. Descriptive statistics was used to find out the mean to make appropriate calculations through the data obtained from the students' responses to link between the items and the variable. Since *always* and *usually* are almost the same degree, they are analyzed together; and *sometimes* and *rarely* almost have the same degree too. Therefore, they are analyzed together. The results attained from both instruments were used to highlight the role of learner-learner interaction on the development of speaking skills.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

1. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest

Figure 1 presents the comparison statistics for the performance of students in pretest and posttest. As the prime focus of the study was to show the effectiveness of learner-learner interaction on the development of speaking skills in the classroom setting, the results of speaking skills in pretest and posttest were compared and analyzed through SPSS to determine whether or not students made a difference in their speaking skills in the posttest over the pretest. The findings of the current study revealed that the majority of the students were able to improve their speaking skills after enrolling an intensive English course based on interactive activities in the classroom. Results of the posttest also revealed that there was a significant difference in the performance of students in the posttest over the pretest. Keeping in view that the majority of the students improved their speaking skills in the posttest, it can be inferred that learner-learner interaction plays an important role in improving students' speaking skills.

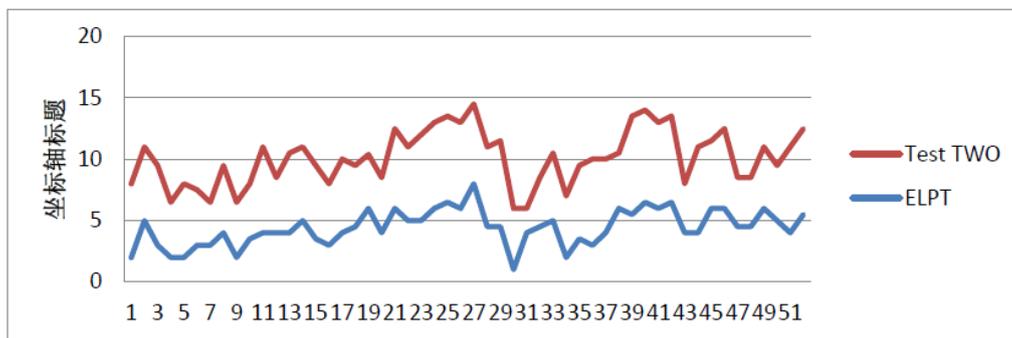


Figure 1. Comparison of Respondents' Test Scores in Pretest and Posttest

2. Questionnaire Results

Figure 2 presents the results of the questionnaire regarding the roles of learner-learner interaction in the development of speaking skills of the students. Results indicate that 77% of the students reported that they always interacted in the classroom in order to develop speaking skills. Findings of the study reveal that 71% of the students claimed that they always had free discussions with one another in the classroom environment, whereas 63% of the students reported that they always had repeated interactions during the classroom in which they were able to improve their speaking skills. Similarly, 60% of the students stated that they always engaged in the interactional activities which assisted them to enhance their speaking ability. Likewise, 58% of the students reported that they were able to improve their speaking competence through learner-learner interaction which took place in the classroom setting; they also believed that their improvement of speaking competence was the result of learner-learner interaction.

Additionally, results of the study present that 43% of students believed that learner-learner interaction was the cause behind improving their speaking skills. Whereas, 40% of the students claimed that they were able to improve their speaking skills through interactional activities that took place during the classes. Further, 38% of learners stated that they were capable of enhancing speaking skills via the regular interactions in which they took part. Similarly, findings indicated that 29% of the students believed that they could advance their speaking ability through the free discussions in the classroom and, whereas only 22% of students reported that they interacted in the target language in the classroom with the other peers. It is also worth mentioning that only 1% of the students claimed that he did not improve his speaking skills through learner-learner interaction. In short, it can be stated that the students generally could improve speaking ability through the interactions happened in the classroom between the peers.

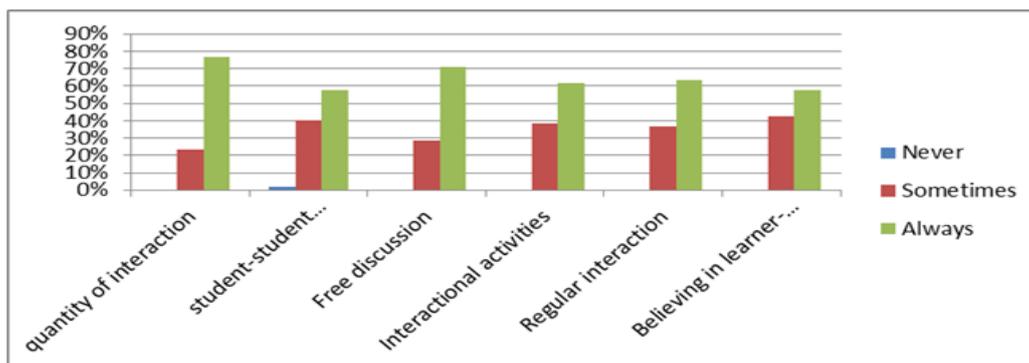


Figure 2. Summary of Response of Students on Roles of Learner-Learner Interaction

B. Discussion

The focus of this current research study was to examine the role of learner-learner interaction in the development of speaking skills of international postgraduate students who attended an intensive English course at Universiti Utara Malaysia. Findings of the study suggested that students tended to improve their speaking skills after participating in the English course for three and a half months. The results of the study revealed that learner-learner interaction had a remarkable effect on enhancing speaking ability of language learners. Additionally, the participants of the study who studied English language based on interactive class activities during the course of study, scored much higher in posttest over the pretest. Findings of the study also indicated that meaningful interaction between students was a significant factor for developing speaking skills.

Through the results of posttest over pretest and questionnaire reported in this study, students interacted in English among themselves and this was a remarkable factor behind their speaking competency development. The results also showed that the students supported each other by participating in the interactions that took place inside the classroom. More importantly, the results presented that interactional classroom activities such as free discussions, repeated interactions and presentations assisted them in enhancing their speaking skills throughout the course of the study.

As the analysis demonstrated in this current study, repeated learner-learner interaction played a central role in helping the students promote their ability in speaking the target language more powerfully and successfully and aided them in language development. Most interestingly, through the results of the questionnaire, it can be claimed that the students did most of the interactions that took place in the classroom which enabled them to develop language competence, in particular speaking skills by the end of the course. Therefore, it is believed that learner-learner interaction has a positive effect and can be said to be the driving force for enhancing speaking skills of the language learners. In short, the results of this research study prove the important role of interaction between the students during the period of the intensive course.

The findings achieved in this study seem to confirm the findings of previous studies which proved the prominent role of learner-learner interaction in the development of oral language development. These findings confirm the findings obtained in the study by Lourduathan and Menon (2005) who found that students were able to improve their speaking skills through training to use selected interaction strategies which resulted in the development of verbal language skills. These findings are also in line with the findings obtained by Cotter (2007) who found that language learners are able to improve their verbal language ability through practising the target language. The study also showed that if input and interaction are available for language learners in the classroom, language learners will consider language as a tool for social interaction. The findings of this current study are also consistent with the findings obtained by Kouicem (2010) who found that the best way to develop speaking skills of students is to massively motivate them to involve in verbal interactions among the students inside classroom. These findings are also in line with the findings achieved by Luan and Sappathy (2011) who found that learners who negotiated for meaning achieved higher vocabulary scores and negotiated interaction proved to be helpful in enabling students to acquire vocabulary items more effectively.

V. CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The current study found that international postgraduate students at Universiti Utara Malaysia were able to improve their speaking skills through classroom interaction during the course of the study. This shows that learner-learner interaction plays an important role in enhancing speaking skills of second language learners. The current study also found that the best way to effectively produce language is to encourage students to participate in verbal interaction inside classroom. Additionally, this current study showed that repeated learner-learner interaction in the classroom setting was the best factor to develop students' speaking skills and reduce their mistakes during a conversation. More importantly, this research study confirmed that classroom aided the students to practise the target language through learner-learner interaction.

Hence, it can be concluded that interaction between students in the classroom environment is crucially effective for L2 development, in particular verbal language development. This study also signified that it was learner-learner interaction in the classroom which enhanced the students' speaking skills. As a result, language teachers should take into their consideration that they need to include in their language classes meaningful interactional activities that encourage student participation, which in turn would assist the development of the learners' speaking skills in the classroom. This study has employed a quantitative research method due to limited constraint. Therefore, it is recommended that in order to get a deeper insight into the issue of learner-learner interaction in promoting speaking skills of language learners, adopting a mixed-method should be considered.

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