The Role of Collaborative Tasks and Peer Interaction in the Development of Second Language Awareness

Helen Basturkmen, Jenefer Philp

Published online on: 31 Oct 2017


Accessed on: 13 Sep 2023


This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
The Role of Collaborative Tasks and Peer Interaction in the Development of Second Language Awareness

Helen Basturkmen and Jenefer Philp

Introduction
This chapter reviews perspectives on the role of collaborative activities and peer interaction in fostering language awareness. The chapter focuses in particular on the kind of “collaborative dialogue” that can occur when learners “work together to solve linguistic problems and/or co-construct language or knowledge about language” during writing, speaking, listening or reading activities (Swain, Brooks and Tocalli-Beller, 2002: 171–172) in instructed settings. It discusses possible links between this kind of dialogue and language awareness which, following Svalberg (2013), we define as explicit knowledge and conscious perception of language. The discussion is specific to oral face-to-face interaction in production activities that are primarily oriented to exchanging meanings. It does not extend to written interaction, computer-mediated communication, interaction in mechanical language practice activities or activities that do not require learner output.

Theoretical and Applied Perspectives
Collaborative activities are widely used in educational contexts. In such contexts, dialogues and discussions are seen as playing important social functions in that they help to build a sense of identity and community in the classroom. They are also seen as playing an important role in the development of language and cognition. Co-constructed dialogues in shared activities, such as peer writing and collaborative problem solving tasks, enable the learner to receive help and lead to internalization and development in individual thinking (Woolfolk, 2014). This function reflects sociocultural perspectives of interaction. According to Vygotsky (1986), learning occurs initially at an interpersonal level through social interaction before becoming internalized. The interaction occurring in dialogues and discussions thus can act as a trigger for learning.

Dialogue and/or discussion-based classroom practices involve symmetrical and/or asymmetrical types of interaction. Both types of interaction are considered beneficial
for learning, although the particular benefits are thought to vary (Renshaw, 2004). In educational contexts, “dialogue as instruction” (Renshaw, 2004: 6) involves a more knowledgeable participant (the teacher, or in the case of the present chapter, a more knowledgeable peer) who assumes the role of guide in structuring and supporting less knowledgeable participants as they struggle to complete a demanding task. Although such interaction involves asymmetrical roles, between peers, relations can be more symmetric. As discussed below, the contributions of the less knowledgeable participants are also important as they become incorporated into the interaction, which would be far less likely in transmission or traditional instruction. The type of assistance or supportive role in interaction is generally linked to the metaphor of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) and Vygotsky’s (1986) concept of the zone of proximal development. The more knowledgeable person provides support that is contiguous to the particular needs of the learner, resulting in gradual change in degree and nature of support needed (Donato, 1994; van de Pol, Volman and Beishuizen, 2010). However, where peer interaction involves children, even in mixed-age classes (Kos, 2016), they may lack the insight to provide this contiguity and other forms of assistance, rather than scaffolding, may be more apparent.

The symmetrical relationship seen amongst peers who are relatively equal in status and knowledge can involve “dialogue as inquiry” (Renshaw, 2004: 9). This is seen in Example 1, as young adult learners of Spanish struggle to express a particular action occurring in the past (Baralt, Gurzynski-Weiss and Kim, 2016: 224). Participants are focused on a particular question or problem (in this case to express time), and neither are greatly more expert or knowledgeable. (The transcription conventions for all the examples in this chapter are set out in Appendix A at the end of this chapter.)

**Example 1**

1 Learner A: Sí pero Luis dormió (Yes but Luis slept)
2 Learner B: I think dormió isn’t that like irregular?
3 Learner A: or wait maybe it should be perfect?
4 Learner B: Aaaahh yes yes yes acción en progreso (Aaaahh yes yes yes action in progress)
5 Learner A: Entonces Luis dormer…dormía…dormía (So Luis to sleep…was sleeping…was sleeping)

Each makes contributions to the discussion that can be questioned by the peer, and this can necessitate the contributor to clarify, explain or justify the basis on which they were made. Through the process of discussion, understanding emerges. Learners can share knowledge (learn from each other) but they can also jointly construct understandings because of their equivalence in knowledge and experience and similar status in the discussion (Damon and Phelps, 1989; Mercer, 2007). One of the key contributions of collaborative activities is that they offer opportunities for students to share information and co-construct knowledge about the content (topic) of the task, often leading to clarification of meaning as they grapple with unfamiliar lexical items or grammatical forms. This is seen in the following conversation (Example 2) concerning migration in an EAP class for adult learners (raw data from Cao, 2009). In their conversation, the two work hard to understand each other’s ideas. As they query both unclear words (‘visa’, line 2; ‘permission’, line 4; ‘official’, line 9) and logic (‘how about if…’, line 8; line
13), their negotiations may help to highlight new lexical items as well as clarify both their thoughts and how to best express them.

Example 2

1 H: No I will not allow anybody without visa
2 C: Without visa, what do you mean by visa, visa means (...) another country’s visa?
3 H: A permission to come to my country
4 C: Er a permission
5 H: A permission to come to my country
6 C: A permission (repeats)
7 H: But I but I make the permission easier, to get
8 C: OK how about how about if somebody um over over um over over the date of their visa, but they still stay staying in your country. If you’re the official,
9 H: I didn’t understand what’s official?
10 C: Like er your visa is out of the date
11 H: Yeah yeah
12 C: But you still stay in
13 H: No XX out, what are you doing in my country, if your visa is finish, go back to your country.

This form of dialogue can be linked to the notion of exploratory talk proposed by Mercer (2000), in which different viewpoints can be resolved with reference to evidence and reason rather than by assertions of expertise or knowledge. Relevant information is offered for joint consideration and participants engage critically but constructively with each other’s ideas. When proposals are challenged, reasons are given and alternatives offered. Agreement is sought as a basis for joint progress. Knowledge is made publicly accountable and reasoning is visible in the talk (Mercer, 2000: 98). In peer discussions, learners can compare their ideas and reflect on their own understanding.

Drawing on a Piagetian perspective on development, peer interaction can lead to conceptual change through a conflict of different understandings (van Boxtel, 2004). That is, peers can provide a unique context for learning because their equal footing allows them to contest one another’s ideas, articulate a range of possibilities and experiment with possible solutions in ways that promote change, precisely because there is no expert. Conflicting ideas provide the catalyst for change, as learners reformulate former understandings to accommodate new ideas. For language learners, this can often involve negotiating what particular form best represents the meaning they want to express. This is illustrated in Example 3, a discussion between peers about the correct form to use for the subjunctive, from research by Baralt et al. (2016: 225) concerning learner engagement among high school students in a Spanish class. Noteworthy too is the learners’ obvious pleasure in their success. Part of the benefits of peer interaction arises particularly where interactions are characterized by a positive affective nature, where mutual trust and respect allow for each person to contribute in constructive ways (De Lisi, 2002; O’Donnell, 2006). The frequent use of questions leaves room for peer contradiction or affirmation, and invites participation from the partner. Ultimately, the students are often able to solve their puzzle collectively.

292
Example 3

1 Learner C: Hmm. Alejandro no … how do you say couldn’t believe?
2 Learner D: No creía I think.
3 Learner C: Alejandro no creía que … que Luis estaba dormiendo [sic]
   (Alejandro could not believe that Luis was sleeping.)
4 Learner D: No creía wait I think we have to use the subjunctive. Because no
   creer? Dudar? Those take the subjunctive.
5 Learner C: No creía que Luis dorma? Duerma? Can we ask [the teacher] what
   it is?
6 Learner D: No I think we have to do it ourselves. So Alejandro no creía que
   Luis duerma. Duermaba.
   (Alejandro could not believe that Luis sleeps-SUB. Was sleeping -SUB).
7 Learner C: I think Alejandro no creía que Luis duerma.
   (…Alejandro could not believe that Luis sleeps-SUB).
8 Learner C: Go us!
9 Learner D: Vamos nosotros! (Go us [sic!]) (laughter)

Collaborative production tasks conducted in small groups or pairs are common in second and foreign language classroom settings. To illustrate, the teacher may set a discussion task in which students in groups of three decide on the most important items of equipment to take on a camping trip and prepare to explain their choices to the rest of the class. Each group draws up a list of items arrived at through a process of discussion, resolving differences when opinions vary. Or, the teacher may set a jigsaw listening task in which learners hear different parts of a story and then work in pairs to reconstruct in writing the whole story. Alternatively, the teacher may set up a communicative situation in which learners have the opportunity and are likely to use a particular form or functions in a meaningful context. For instance, following presentation of language for making complaints, the teacher sets up a role-play activity based on a scenario involving an unhappy customer and a shop assistant.

Collaborative activities and peer interaction are used in language teaching with an emphasis on learning through communicating in the target language (Neumann and McDonough, 2015). In communicative language teaching, pair and group work activities are often advocated on the grounds that they are motivating and that they enable learners to hear language used by others and to produce more language than is possible in teacher-fronted activities (Richards, 2006). Communicative tasks are used in a number of ways, both as practice and as a means of exploring and developing new language use. For practice, such tasks may provide the opportunity to consolidate learning of specific forms, as seen in Example 4, from a high school class (Tognini, 2008: 221). Here the students are providing information unknown to their partner and make use of both formulaic sequences and new vocabulary items.

Example 4

1 Std O: Qu’est-ce faire, tu aller faire pendant les vacances?
   What do, you to go do during the holidays? [sic]
2 Std M: Pendant les vacances, j’aime aller à la plage et à la montagne
   During the holidays I like to go to the beach and to the mountains.
3 Std O: Montagne. Mountain?
Such use for practice can be associated with *Skill Acquisition Theory* in which knowledge about language, or ‘declarative knowledge’ (for example, knowledge about a new structure that has been presented) through a process of practice becomes automatic and able to be drawn on in spontaneous production. For discussion of this theory and the implicit nature of procedural and automatic knowledge, see DeKeyser and Criado (2013). Increased fluency is perhaps “the least controversial claim for output” (Williams, 2012: 322). Williams (2012) describes a model of second language development processes comprising three largely sequential processes, although the processes may overlap and influence one another. The first two processes directly concern new knowledge creation, and are those most obviously related to language awareness. In initial *knowledge internalization*, learners notice input and establish form-meaning connections, that is, the link between a given language form and its meaning in use. In *knowledge restructuring*, additional input and negative feedback are crucial: these enable learners to modify the initial connections. For example, negative feedback provides indications, either explicitly or implicitly, that language production or perception is incorrect. In *knowledge consolidation*, repeated retrieval and deeper processing enable learners to build fluency in the use of their L2 knowledge and consolidate their learning. This is seen in Example 4 above.

Following the observation by Hatch (1978), that learners can learn the grammar of a second language through the process of interaction (rather than learn the grammar in order to interact), the question of how interaction can aid learning has been a subject of theoretical and empirical research in second language acquisition (Ellis, 1999). The function of peer interaction and collaborative tasks for language learning (knowledge internalization and restructuring) can be aligned with both current cognitive and sociocultural views on second language acquisition (Sato and Ballinger, 2012; Storch, 2013a) and research evidence indicating the importance of noticing and attention in language learning (Svalberg, 2013).

Cognitive theories include Long’s *Interaction Hypothesis* (1996) and Swain’s *Output Hypothesis* (1985). Collaborative activities provide conditions in which communication difficulties and negotiation of meaning are likely to occur. Negotiation of meaning facilitates the kind of conscious “noticing” that Schmidt (1990) suggests helps learners to become aware of language forms. The *Interaction Hypothesis* suggests that interactional sequences involving communication difficulties lead to negotiation of meaning, which is a primary source of data for language learning (Ellis, 1999). Negotiation of meaning sequences can serve to make aspects of language more understandable for learners and thus more likely to be acquired. Negotiation of meaning can provide learners with positive evidence, including models of “what is grammatical and acceptable” (Long, 1996: 413) and negative evidence, such as recasts (indirect feedback) on the learner’s attempt to use the language that enable learners to compare their production with another possibly grammatically correct version (of a peer), or accurate version of a teacher. It can also provide learners with opportunities to modify their output/production. However, to process the negative evidence, research suggests learners need to be at the right developmental stage (Mackay and Philp, 1998) and be paying attention to linguistic form and not just meaning (Ellis, 1999).

Swain’s (1995) description of her *Output Hypothesis* suggests that, in order to achieve high levels of grammatical and sociolinguistic competence, learners need to be compelled to produce language output (pushed output) a little beyond their comfort zone. For example, in a production task learners may experience difficulties in reaching their communicative goals because of their limited knowledge of the L2. When required to
produce language, learners encounter gaps in their linguistic knowledge, which they endeavor to overcome in order to complete the task. Output triggers noticing, as learners’ limited knowledge of the L2 becomes apparent to them (they notice holes) (Doughty and Williams, 1998). It also triggers noticing when learners test hypotheses in modifying their output after receiving negative evidence. In these ways, pushed output provides opportunities for learners to consciously reflect on linguistic forms. Not all collaborative activities in the L2 classroom are production tasks but many are (see the illustrative pair and group work activities above).

Collaborative activities in second language learning can be justified by reference to sociocultural theory and the view that language and cognitive skills develop through interaction with others (Neumann and McDonough, 2015). Based on Vygotsky, as described above, a more knowledgeable person is needed in the dialogue (interaction) to support the less knowledgeable person's move towards being able to complete a task independently. In the classroom context, teachers have generally been seen as the more knowledgeable participants in dialogue. It can be argued however that learners/peers can act concurrently as experts and novices to support each other in learning language in this way (Swain et al., 2002) and empirical evidence illustrates that L2 learners do act to provide scaffolding to peers during interaction in collaborative activities (Donato, 1994; Ohta, 2000, 2001; Suzuki and Itagaki, 2007; Watanabe and Swain, 2007) including collaborative co-construction of written text (Neumann and McDonough, 2015; Storch, 2008; Williams, 2012). This is not to say that peers are always supportive, or necessarily provide useful scaffolding. For example, Young and Tedick (2016), in a study of a 5th-grade Spanish class, found some more proficient peers marginalized less-proficient members of the group through ridicule and over-correction. Conversely, homogenous peers were able to provide support through provision of “prompts, cues, repetition, and corrective feedback” (p. 148). As Philp (2016: 389) notes, such research underlines the important role of the teacher in fostering a positive class environment, including training in how to collaborate and work as effective interlocutors (O’Donnell, 2006; Dörnyei and Maldarez, 1997; Shim, Kiefer and Wang, 2013).

How and When Does Peer Interaction Foster Language Awareness?

Language-Related Episodes

In this section, we focus on what the research suggests about peer interaction and language awareness. We noted above that the symmetry between peers can provide a context that fosters trialing and consideration of possibilities as learners struggle to express intended meanings. Collaborative activities provide opportunities for learners to engage in the kind of interaction that is conducive to language awareness; that is, interaction which reflects mutuality and equality (Damon and Phelps, 1989; Storch, 2002), and is oriented to meaning. Mutuality and equality will be reflected when learners listen to one another, each playing a substantial part in the content and direction the conversation takes because they take each other’s ideas on. Research has shown that although the oral interaction during collaborative tasks may be oriented primarily to meaning, crucially, the interaction may also periodically become oriented to the linguistic code, for example when students struggle to make themselves understood or when they correct one another’s linguistic expression of an idea. These interludes can provide opportunities for the students to share knowledge and co-construct knowledge about language.
While exchanging ideas on which items of camping equipment to include on a list, for instance, the students might discuss the choice of modal to express a future hypothetical situation (we would or we will need cooking equipment if there isn’t a kitchen?). Notable here is that the task itself encourages use of specific forms that the learner is yet to master fully (see Philp, 2016; Samuda and Bygate, 2008). For example, in a university class in Thailand, McDonough (2004) found that collaborative discussion tasks about the environment encouraged learners to use the real and unreal conditional, and to pay more attention to their accuracy. In the following example, as two students discuss effects of pollution, Chaiyawat’s request for clarification (‘what?’) prompts Jenjira to self-correct and achieve more target-like use (‘traps heat’) (2004: 220).

**Example 5**

1. Suphan: If carbon dioxide build up in the atmosphere
2. Chaiyawat: Build up in the atmosphere uh
3. Suphan: Yeah
4. Jenjira: It trap heat
5. Chaiyawat: What?
6. Jenjira: It traps heat

Opportunities for negotiation of meaning, as seen in this example, and the need to resolve together linguistic problems that arise in collaborative activities are important, as discussion of linguistic issues within the context of meaning-oriented activity is thought to have particular benefits for language awareness (Mackey, Abhbul and Gass, 2012). As noted above, having to use language for a purpose can help learners start to notice connections between meaning and linguistic forms (whether grammatical, lexical or phonological). For example, a problem in production or reception may serve to draw attention to an unfamiliar word, or to choice of tense in English, or to the use of a particular classifier in Chinese. Sometimes this can lead to discussion of a particularly problematic form, where learners draw on their explicit knowledge to assist their understandings. Sometimes a learner may simply notice a form as unusual, leading them to then notice it on other occasions, in different contexts and over time, so that they steadily build up a sense of how it is used and for what meaning (see Batstone and Philp, 2013).

Studies have examined learners’ interaction in collaborative tasks to search for evidence of this kind of attention to language. Within this area researchers have used the construct of ‘language-related episodes’ (LREs) to refer to instances when talk in meaning-focused communication turns directly to language issues. LREs have been defined as “any part of the dialogue where students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others” (Swain and Lapkin, 1998: 328). Investigation into learners’ talk about language in LREs corroborates the importance of noticing and underscores the role of social interaction in helping learners construct language knowledge (Svalberg, 2013).

The following LREs illustrate language learners talking about the language they are producing. They are taken from a study (Loewen and Basturkmen, 2005) in which university students in a second language writing class were observed as they worked in groups of three to compose a data commentary text with reference to a chart showing rent increases in three cities in China. The first two LREs show learners correcting their peers and the third shows a learner asking for advice.
Collaborative Tasks & Peer Interaction

Example 6

1  Joe: The top chart compare
2  Donna: Compare or compares?
3  Julia: Compare (.) comparison (.) the chart compares
4  Joe: Mmm

In Example 6, Donna queries Joe’s use of the verb compare and Julia supplies the correct form, compares.

Example 7

1  Julia: Should I write something else?
2  Joe: In figure
3  Julia: In the figure

In Example 7, Julia corrects Joe when he omits the definite article (the). With reference to sociocultural theory, we might describe Donna and Julia in Example 6 and Julia in Example 7 as assuming the role of the more knowledgeable participants in the interaction.

Example 8

1  Julia: Yeah, we talked about the change, so should we talk about the first three mentioned cities?
2  Donna: Mmm
3  Julia: Are also considerably higher than
4  Joe: Yeah
5  Julia: Can we write that?
6  Joe: Yes
7  Julia: Or should I
8  Joe: Yes
9  Julia: State the names again?
10 Donna: I think you can use the pronoun don’t need to mention the three cities again

(Examples 6, 7, 8 from Loewen and Basturkmen, 2005: 179)

In Example 8, Julia asks her peers for advice about restating the names of the cities that they are describing in their written text. Donna responds with the suggestion of using a pronoun, stating that there is no need to use the names of the cities again. Donna thus appears to make her “reasoning visible in the talk” (Mercer, 2000: 98).

What Kinds of Language Forms do Peers Focus on?

Above we noted that learners may focus on different aspects of language form. Previous research suggests that a focus on grammatical form more commonly occurs when there is a written component to the oral task, for example, during written collaborative tasks (Bitchener and Storch, 2016). In purely oral tasks, noticing and resolution of problems relating to lexical forms are more common (Williams, 1999; Philp et. al, 2014). This is
seen in Example 9 below (unpublished data, Mackey et al., 2015). In this simulation task, four learners assume a different role and must defend their right to a place in a lifeboat to survive. Here, the vet (V) and the science researcher (SR) state their cases, but SR doesn’t understand the word ‘minor’, confusing it for ‘manner’ (line 3) until it is both repeated and recontextualized by V (line 6).

Example 9

1  V: =I’m trying to save you=
2  SR: =I’m not finished. I understand some of you already have minor injuries so you may need me. I don’t know who.
3  V: Manner.
4  SR: Minor Minor
5  V: What do you mean for manner?
6  SR: Minor injury.
7  V: Okay, okay.

What learners tend to focus on in peer interaction appears to differ according to mode, with oral work being characterized by a greater attention to lexis and written tasks encouraging attention to grammatical form (see, for example, Adams and Ross-Feldman, 2008; Garcia Mayo, 2002; Garcia Mayo and Azkarai, 2016; Williams, 1999). Niu (2009), in a study of 16 adult university students in China, compared performance on collaborative oral and written reconstructive tasks. Niu found that the learners’ attention to language was qualitatively different according to mode: in oral tasks, issues tended to be resolved in few turns and with little or no justification, while the written task encouraged greater attention to grammatical form compared to the oral task, and involved lengthier LREs, with more incidences of reasoning and explanation. Taken together, previous research suggests that oral collaborative tasks are particularly useful for improving fluency, and paying attention to lexis, and that adding a written component to oral tasks can help learners to focus in more detail on particular language features including grammatical form, organization and discourse features.

Other factors seen to impact on focus and incidence of LREs in collaborative tasks include task and teacher input. Both task type and teacher’s pre-emptive focus can impact learner awareness of specific linguistic features during oral tasks. For example, Philp, Walter and Basturkmen (2010) found a higher incidence of attention to form where the teacher oriented learners’ attention to use of a particular linguistic feature prior to the task, and where the task elicited use of the target structure.

Task Type and Task Features

Recent research suggests that particular task features may inhibit or promote the quality and quantity of language awareness. For example, the cognitive complexity of the task (Robinson, 2001), and the extent to which the task requires certain grammatical forms, may impact the extent to which learners explicitly think about language. Baralt et al. (2016) compared 20 Spanish learners’ engagement on simple and complex tasks. Examples 1 and 3 cited above are drawn from this research. Interestingly, as seen in these examples, it was those learners who worked on more complex tasks who tended to reflect on language form, and hypothesized about the grammatical representation of
particular meanings related to tense and aspect. They not only tried out different forms, but also used their metalinguistic knowledge to help identify the forms they needed.

There is now a body of evidence that learning/awareness does accrue from collaborative tasks, providing the task is set up in certain ways and that the participants have the core language they need to attempt the task. Learners may be primed to attend to a specific linguistic feature, or required to use a specific linguistic feature by the task itself, as we saw in Example 5 above, in the use of the conditional.

Collaborative writing tasks may provide an optimal environment for creation of new language knowledge (Williams, 2012). Research into collaborative writing has provided ample evidence indicating the opportunities such tasks have for learners to “create new knowledge (either initial or restructured knowledge) not uniquely held by any one of them prior to the task” (Williams, 2012: 325), thus supporting sociocultural theories of learning. In addition, in collaborative tasks learners pool their language knowledge. Writing tasks (which provide a slower pace of production) may provide better conditions for learners to reflect on pooled knowledge. Reconstructive tasks that include a writing component, such as dictogloss (Wajnryb, 1990) and peer revision tasks (Suzuki, 2012), can be particularly fruitful because the task of collaborative writing production compels learners to reflect on their implicit language knowledge to make it “more explicit and available for use” (Williams, 2012: 325) (see also, Tocalli-Beller and Swain, 2005; Bitchener and Storch, 2016).

Other peer activities can require an explicit focus on language form and encourage the use of metalanguage to develop language awareness. For example, in research by Moranski and Toth (2016) involving adolescent learners of Spanish in a US high school, the collaborative activity required deeper processing of a specific form through co-construction of grammar rules to explain the patterns they saw in written input. In Example 10 (Moranski and Toth, 2016: 306), we see two students pool their knowledge to try to explain the language.

Example 10

10 Diego: This is like, stuff that’s like, basically
11 this is kind of indirect. So like things
12 happen to her.
13 Raquel: Yeah that’s what [reflexive
14 Diego: umm]
15 Raquel: =is. Something that you do to yourself.
16 Diego: No that’s not re (. ) [no
17 Raquel: That’s] the [things with the SE ME =
18 Diego: Well kind of]
19 Raquel: =at the ends.
20 Diego: Yeah.
21 Raquel: Yeah↑ Which is reflexive, right↑
22 Diego: Well it’s just (. ) member, you know,
23 it’s kind of like indirect where it’s (. )
24 (they) did it to her like

Of particular interest in Moranski and Toth’s research is their recognition of different levels of analytic abstraction, ranging from simple labelling, “dijo’s present [tense] isn’t it?” , to trying to define a particular concept such as reflexivity (as seen in Example 10,
Learner Factors

Some research has focused on the effects of (a) level of proficiency and (b) relative proficiency between peers working together. Not surprisingly, findings suggest that higher proficiency learners are more likely to pay attention to grammatical features, and to be able to resolve LREs more successfully (e.g. Leeser, 2004; Williams, 1999). Proficiency pairings can also make a difference. For example, Leeser (2004) suggests interacting with a higher-level interlocutor would encourage greater focus on form. However, other research suggests that patterns of interaction (Storch, 2002, 2009) could play a greater role in whether and to what extent learners pay attention to language form. Storch’s work on collaborative writing, based on Damon and Phelps’ 1989 research, has been instrumental in identifying patterns of interaction between L2 learners, and demonstrating its impact for effective peer interaction. Specifically, Storch found that peers who demonstrated high mutuality in their patterns of interaction (whether or not they differed in knowledge or proficiency) were more likely to work in ways that support language learning. Rouhshad and Storch (2016: 269–270), for example, found learners who collaborated well were involved in more extensive discussions during LREs, to “pay attention to and deliberate about language choice, to pool their linguistic resources to resolve the deliberations, and to retain the linguistic knowledge that was instructed during the deliberations” (pp. 269–270). Their study of adult ESL learners [which also involved comparison between face-to-face and mediated communication, not discussed here] found that collaboration was matched by greater quality of attention to language, greater deliberation (involving repetition, rephrasing and pooling of knowledge over multiple turns, and more resolution of LREs (see also Storch, 2008). What is clear is the importance of how students work together, the extent to which they are willing to listen to one another, respect one another’s ideas and welcome one another’s suggestions and feedback, irrespective of differences in proficiency or experience (see Storch and Aldosari, 2013).

There is an increasing recognition of the importance of relations between learners for effective peer interaction (Philp et al., 2014; Sato and Ballinger, 2016). In relation to collaborative work and language awareness, this is particularly the case. Sato and Ballinger (2012: 158) argue for the importance of “(1) achieving a collaborative mindset among learners and (2) raising language awareness and reciprocal learning through peer CF” (p. 158). Research concerning peer interaction in adult and child classrooms suggests that a “collaborative mindset” is unlikely to happen automatically for all, but may be fostered through explicit training and modelling by the teacher (e.g. Dawes, 2004; Dörnyei and Malderez, 1997; Mercer, 1996). Similarly, some applied linguists suggest that language awareness and peer feedback are both skills that may be improved through explicit instruction, and by raising awareness of the benefits of peer collaborative interaction, the value of paying attention to form and meaning (e.g. Dörnyei and Malderez, 1997; Fujii, Ziegler and Mackey, 2016).

Methods Used to Investigate the Topic

One way of researching peer interaction is an experimental approach, seeking to answer very specific questions. Because this requires careful control of all variables, a specific
A cohort of participants is selected and gathered together for the purposes of the research itself. This research is complemented by quasi-experimental classroom-based studies, in which the ‘laboratory’ is in fact the intact classroom, optimal for preserving greater ecological validity (i.e. it may be closer to what students actually do in the classroom). Such research tends to involve tasks or activities developed or adapted for the purposes of the research. This kind of research may be largely descriptive in nature and involve coding of specific features (e.g. the incidence and type of LREs). However, it may also include a pre and/or post test as a measure of changes following peer interaction, or the use of tailor-made tests (matching individual’s experience with later outcomes). Other researchers seek to measure change through comparison of feedback / LREs arising in conversation with peers and applications to subsequent output. A third way of investigating peer interaction and language awareness is to take a more descriptive approach, essentially recording and analysing naturalistic data (students in their everyday classes working together) for a heuristic purpose (e.g. discovering features of peer interaction or peer LREs). Such work is further complemented by the use of retrospective interviews with class participants, including stimulated recall. Using audio or video recordings of their interaction, such interviews can elicit learners’ perceptions and personal feelings about what happened at the time of the interaction. Other descriptive studies employ an ethnographic approach, and thus provide a much richer, more detailed and multimodal approach to data collection.

**Theoretical and Practical Impacts of the Research Carried Out on the Topic**

Can learners be taught more effective ways to work collaboratively on communication problems and co-construct knowledge (see Sato and Ballinger, 2016)? Storch’s (2013b) study of LREs in collaborative writing tasks led to recommendations that collaborative interaction should be modelled to students, and should provide communication strategies (e.g. Neumann and McDonough, 2015).

Findings of research on peer interaction can be used to inform language practitioners of effective ways of using peer interaction and collaborative tasks, and to encourage reflection on how to make the most of peer interaction in the classroom to foster language awareness. Conversely, language practitioners have valuable insights themselves concerning peer work, of great use to the researcher in developing research questions useful both to classroom practice and to understanding aspects of instructed language learning. Those teachers who frequently use and/or develop their own collaborative activities are often well aware of the potential benefits of these for fluency development and for consolidating learning. Some language practitioners may however be less aware of the potential function of collaborative tasks and peer interaction for facilitating noticing of language and helping learners extend or restructure their knowledge of the second language linguistic forms. Thus, teachers may be interested in knowing more about the potential role of such activities in raising learners’ awareness of linguistic features of the target language.

**Directions for Future Research**

Work on peer interaction has changed greatly in focus even in the past 15 years, and so too has our understanding of the nature of language awareness. A greater balance
in the use of cognitive and sociocultural perspectives has provided a broader scope in our research in how oral and written peer work might best support greater language awareness. While recent research suggests peer interaction is a valuable learning context, complementing teacher-student interaction (Batstone and Philp, 2013), the potential benefits and limitations of some aspects of peer interaction in today’s complex classroom interactions are as yet unclear. Topics for further investigation include differences in language awareness according to modes of communication (e.g. face-to-face and computer-mediated), the use of translanguaging to support language awareness during peer work, and those task features that best foster effective peer talk around language. As we saw in the research by Baralt et al. (2016), Svalberg’s (2009, 2012) work on language awareness and learner engagement suggests that we need to adopt a more complex construct of peers’ engagement in language awareness, with the recognition that engagement is not only cognitive, but also affective and social (see also Philp and Duchesne, 2016). Storch’s seminal work on patterns of interaction has led to a rich seam of research in many different classroom settings, affording greater insights into peer collaboration, and the recognition that how learners relate to one another may be more critical in fact than relative proficiency level. This too is certainly an area for continuing research, as we seek to foster effective peer interaction in language classrooms. That is, interaction that offers the opportunity to engage in language talk in ways that are challenging, enjoyable, motivating, and that support language development and use.

**Related Topics**

Instructed second language learning; oral interaction; pair and group work; language-related episodes

**References**


Collaborative Tasks & Peer Interaction


### Appendix A

#### Transcription key for all examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(italics)</td>
<td>Translations into English are provided in italics in brackets</td>
<td>(repeats) transcriber explains that the utterance is a repetition of the previous utterance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>()</td>
<td>Transcriber’s comments indicated by brackets</td>
<td>[the teacher] – the speaker addressed the teacher by name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XX</td>
<td>unclear, word or syllable not transcribed</td>
<td>[words] note by the transcriber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>pause (relative length of pause indicated by number of periods)</td>
<td>[the teacher] – the speaker addressed the teacher by name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[words]</td>
<td>note by the transcriber</td>
<td>[the teacher] – the speaker addressed the teacher by name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitals</td>
<td>Identifies grammatical form of verb</td>
<td>Was sleeping -SUB (subjunctive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[sic]</td>
<td>original utterance of speaker as spoken (non-target like)</td>
<td>What are you to do, going to do during the holidays? [sic]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>Square bracket indicates talking at same time as interlocutor</td>
<td>Raquel: Yeah that’s what [reflexive]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=</td>
<td>Equals sign indicates interruption of speech by interlocutor</td>
<td>Diego: umm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR</td>
<td>I’m not finished.</td>
<td>SR = I’m not finished.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>