ANALYSING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A PAIR TALK ON AN EDITING TASK ON TWO INTERMEDIATE INDONESIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have paid attention to peer interaction as a means of second language (L2) learning. Interaction among learners in carrying out task is believed to mediate the process of L2 learning. The study therefore observed the nature of a pair talk in an interaction while completing a grammar task. The interaction was recorded and analysed by using language related episodes (LRE) in terms of form, lexicality, and mechanism. LRE was used in order to understand the characteristics of a pair talk at homogenous (intermediate-intermediate) level and to examine the participants' accuracy in completing the task. The results suggest that even though the pair solved the questions in the task using form-focused LRE (F-LRE) and resolved the task interactively, they were not able to make correct decisions over grammar errors.

Keywords: *interaction, pair talk, LRE, homogenous level*

INTRODUCTION

Several studies suggest that peer interaction is very beneficial in promoting second language (L2) learning (Storch, 2007; Watanabe & Swain, 2007). During peer interaction, learners use and explore the L2 as well as work collaboratively to solve the linguistic impasses. This study therefore attempted to analyse the characteristics of a pair talk at intermediate level when completing an editing task. Further, Storch (2007) found that learners working in pair could reach more

accurate grammar over the learners working individually. Thus, it also examined whether working in pair can help intermediate learners make correctly grammatical decisions when solving the given task. Given the lack of study focusing on intermediate proficiency dyad, the study sought to understand the characteristics of learners' talk that was produced by the same degree of homogenous level, which is intermediate-intermediate level.

Literature Review

This article examines the characteristics of a pair work between two intermediate English learners during completion of a grammar task. In L2 classroom, group work and/or peer interaction are commonly carried since it can facilitate the process of L2 learning (Gass & Mackey, 2007). The interaction process that occurs during completing task is believed to be the stage where learners use and exchange their knowledge and information of the L2. This view is supported by the psycholinguistic and sociocultural theory. Despite their ontological differences, both acknowledge the importance of interaction for L2 learners to assist each other in developing their language proficiency.

In sociocultural theory, cognitive development can be established via interaction between people. This development occurs during process of imitation and zones of proximal development (ZPD) where the more advanced facilitators such as teachers, tutors, or peers assist the lower learners (Vygotsky, 1987). In the imitation process, learners exchange languages and might fix their utterances that have been corrected by more proficient peers. Meanwhile, Psycholinguistics posits the theory of interaction as a means of language transfer. Long (1996) in his revised theory argues that language learning is transferred from feedback, input, and output. The process of giving feedback, receiving input, and producing output might occur when there is a communication failure.

In analysing what occurs in the interaction and how language is learned, many studies have focused more on the interaction between peers with heterogeneous level.

A study conducted by Leeser (2004) investigated how the different proficiency had an impact on learner proficiency towards the production of LREs (Storch, 2007). This study revealed that higher proficient learners were able to produce more LREs compared to their lower counterparts. Interestingly, the higher pairs produced more on grammatical form of LREs whereas the lower ones gave their attentions more to the lexical items given the difficulty in understanding the task. Likewise, Watanabe and Swain (2007) investigated the effect of proficiency differences on the production of LREs and the participants' post test results among the Japanese participants who were divided into four groups where four intermediate learners worked with their lower and higher English proficiency partner. The study revealed that although the intermediate participants produced more LREs when working with their more capable peers but they were able to achieve higher post-test score when paired with their less capable counterparts. This then suggests that lower competent learners can contribute to the language development of their higher counterparts.

Given the extensive research was done to learners with different proficiency level, there is lack of data that confirm the characteristics of learners with a similar level especially towards intermediate-intermediate level learners.

METHOD

Research Questions

While Storch (2007) examined the nature of pair talks on the editing task without focusing on proficiency levels, this study focused on the characteristics of pair talks with the same proficiency level (intermediate-intermediate levels). Thus, it formulated two research questions as follows;

1. What are the characteristics of the pair talk at intermediate level when completing the editing task?

2. Can working in pair help intermediate learners make correctly grammatical decisions when solving the editing task?

Data Collection

This study was conducted online via Skype where participants were recorded during completing the editing task (see Appendix A). The editing task has been

proven to be successful in drawing learners' attention to form-focused and lexical choices (Storch, 2007). The task provided in the study was adapted from first year preparation exam and practice of Roma Tre University (First year preparation and practice). It required participants to correct one error appeared on each numbered line. The errors included in the task were 10 grammar, two word order, one vocabulary, and two spelling errors. Afterwards, the data were collected after the pair finished completing the editing task for analysis. The analysis used Language Related Episodes (LREs), which will be explained further in data analysis, to investigate accuracy over grammar and lexis during the completion of the given task.

Participants

Two Indonesian learners of English at intermediate level participated in the study. The participants were graduated from English department at one of universities in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. However, the learners are still learning English in order to improve their TOEFL score at one of private English courses. They are currently working as administrative staffs and have part-time jobs teaching general English at elementary level. The learners have similar Institutional Testing Program (ITP) TOEFL scores from 490 to 500. This means that their English L2 proficiency levels were intermediate levels, which were fairly homogenous (Murakawa, 1997, as cited in Watanabe and Swain, 2007). The learners were chosen because of their close relationship with the researcher as well as their willingness to participate in the study.

The Context

The study was conducted within the context of the teaching English department of a university in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. The learners attended only one session to complete the given editing task. The session was held on Sunday to avoid the participants getting distracted by the activities that they normally do during weekdays.

Data Analysis

In analysing the characteristics of the pair talk that learners produced, the talk was recorded during the editing task completion and transcribed after that. The transcribed data was analysed by using the same approach in Storch's (2007) study. It examined the nature of the pair talks by using analysis of Language Related Episodes (LREs). LREs occurs when 2nd language learners 'talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others,' (Swain and Lapkin, 1998, p. 326). Furthermore, LREs are divided into three categories (Swain, 1998, as cited in Storch, 2007). Firstly, Form-focused LRE (F-LRE) was where learners focused on grammatical form. Secondly, Lexical LRE (L-LRE) was where learners paid attention on word meanings, word choices, and prepositions. Finally, Mechanical LRE (M-LRE) was where learners focused on punctuation, spelling, and punctuation

➢ Excerpt 1: F-LRE (modal auxiliary verb)

Excerpt 1 is an example of F-LRE where the learners discuss about modal auxiliary verb. First, Olin (O) reads aloud sentence number 2 in the given the text and questions the meaning of word 'frank'. However, Lely (L) shifts Olin's attention to another part of sentence and makes suggestion of what supposed to be the correct answer is. Later, Olin agrees and also provides Lely with the alternative answer (Line 24-25). This process is referred to as 'collective scaffolding' by Donato (1994) where learners internalize the new-shared knowledge.

```
24.   O: But I must to be frank, what does frank mean? At
         first I was…
25.   L: Don't think about that. Must right? Must is no
         'to'. After must, no 'to'.
26.   O: Oh yeah yeah…but I have to, right?
27.   L: I have to, okay…have have.
28.   O: Oh yeah…But I have to, okay.
29.   L: to be frank, right?
30.   O: right.
```

➢ Excerpt 2: L-LRE (word meaning)

Excerpt 2 provides example of L-LRE dealing with word meaning. Lely requests for meaning of word 'generous' in sentence 12. Olin provides Lely with the meaning of 'generous' to respond to Lely's request.

```
161  O: He generous to everyone he knows but sometimes
        he's too much generous. He's too generous.
162  L: what does it mean generous. Do you know that?
163  O: Kind, friendly.
164  L: Okay.
```

> ➤ **Excerpt 3: M-LRE (spelling)**

Excerpt 3 shows an example of an M-LRE focusing on spelling. Olin is unsure about the word spelling of worse in sentence number 13 and Lely reads out the sentence again and provides Olin with correct spelling.

```
184  O: But  the  worse  thing  about  Fransisco  is  his
        jealousy.
185  L: Jealousy? We need noun here right?
186  O: Yes
187  L: But jeaolusy?
188  O: Worse or worst?
189  L: Jeaolusy is noun yeah. It's okay with jealousy
190  O: Bad worse worst
191  L: The  worse  thing  about … ooo  worst… w-o-r-s-t,
        right?
192  O: Speeling yeaahh, w-t like this?
193  L: Yeah yeah
194  O: There's no comparison here? But he worst.
195  L: The most, right?
196  O: The most bad thing
197  L: hmmm
```

From the three excerpts above, it can be analysed that the episodes are the interactive process. The interactive process is defined when two learners are involved in the decision-making process. Non-interactive process, meanwhile, is another process where only one participant makes decision during the talk (Storch, 2007).

In addition, LREs were also coded the outcome of the talk as correct/acceptable, incorrect/unacceptable, or unresolved (Leeser, 2004). Three excerpts above are examples of correct/acceptable LREs. Excerpt 4 is an example of incorrect LRE where Olin reads out sentence number 3 and Lely suggests that word order is the error in the given sentence. In line 32 of the transcript, Lely suggests that the possible error in the sentence is word order but she seems unsure about her answer. From line 33 to line 40, both of the learners try out new possibilities by trial and error. However, in line 41, Olin suggests Lely that the problem is not word order but prepositional phrase 'interested in.' Lely, in this matter, agrees with Olin and fails to convince Olin that black short hair should be used in the given sentence

Excerpt 4: F-LRE (Word order)

```
31. O: At first, I was only interested in his looks. He
       has short black hair

32. L: How about colour and adjective? Colour include to
       adjective, right?

33. O: Yes.

34. L: He has black short hair or he has short black hair
       or…correct or not?

35. O: Short black black short hair? Don't you think it
       short black?

36. L: Short black hair.

37. O: He has short black hair and brown eyes … no no …

38. L: I forgot that. Colour first or adjective first? but
       colour include

     to adjective.

39. O: I don't know. Is every question has to be mistake?

40. L: I think yes.

41. O: he  has  black  short  hair.  Maybe  not  there.
       Interested?

42. L: in his looks or

43. O: On on

44. L: on his looks.

45. O: Yes.

46. L: Interested on his looks. Okay.
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```
47. O: on his looks.
```

Excerpt 5 is the other example of incorrect/unacceptable LRE. Lely requests for clarification whether to be 'is' should not be included since 'tired' is a verb. Olin agrees on Lely's answer, and they are convinced that 'tired' is a verb in the given sentence.

➢ Excerpt 5: F-LRE (adjective)

```
153  L: Angry very quickly with parents. Okay. This is
        because

             he has a stressful work and he is…aaa… he is

             always tired or he always tired?
154  O: He always
155  L: Always . no 'to be', right?
156  O: Not.
157  L: Because there is verb.
158  O: He always … tired.
159  L: Just type tired. He always tired.
```

Results

What are the characteristics of the pair talk at intermediate level when completing the editing task? The analyses of the transcript of the pair talk at intermediate level revealed that F-LRE was the most frequently deliberated during the pair interaction. This is not surprising given the grammar errors in the given editing task were provided more with grammar errors. In addition, M-LRE received the least attention in the pair talk. This result is consistent with the findings of previous study of Storch (2007).

In terms of level of involvement, the characteristics of the pair talk is resolved most of the questions interactively, especially F-LREs. In addition, the unresolved LRE cannot be found in the pair talk. However, the learners left some numbers unresolved several times and attempted to solve other numbers.

```
55. L:I don't think particularly good looking but he has
       something …
56. O: I don't think he is.
57. L: He is. There is no subject.
```

```
58. O: Yeah.

59. L: We need subject here. Just type particularly here.

60. O: particularly, okay

61. L: particularly good looking but he has that make me
       eee that

          make him special person to me. That make him
       special person...

62. O: For me?

63. L: I think yes for me.

64. O: Okay.
```

They afterwards came back to the unresolved numbers and attempted to solve them.

```
124 L: I don't think he has particularly good looking but
       he has

          something different. He has something that
       make him special

125 O: Ooo makes This one no…makes

126 L: He has something that...

127 O: Makes…him

128 L: That makes him special

129 O: Yes…makes, right? Something that makes … something.

130 L: That makes him. Yeah.

131 O: So this not for me yeah? Makes.
```

At the end, the learners were successful to answer all the questions given.

Finally, can working in pair help intermediate learners make correctly grammatical decisions when solving the editing task? This study found that the learners could not reach grammatically incorrect decisions on the given editing task when working in pair. The learners were able to solve 6 questions correctly out of 15 questions. This does not mean that they did not know the basic concepts of the grammar. There were several times when the learners discussed the correct concept of grammar but they ended up having incorrect decision. This is in line with Swain's statement (1998, as cited in Storch, 1999) that learners might produce grammatically incorrect decision during the interaction.

Implications for teaching

Given the small sample size (2) and one-attempt test, it is difficult to generalize findings, to say that peer interaction can promote learners to reach more correct decisions over grammatical items in the given task. Thus, to know whether the English language learners get benefit from working in pairs particularly on writing and form-focused task, future study should include larger participants to examine the nature of the pair talks produced by different proficiencies as well as to investigate whether peer interaction can assist learners in developing their cognitive learning potential at the university in Banda Aceh. Further, the future study should also interview learners whether they benefit from working in pair after giving the editing task.

It should also be noted that working in pair during writing and form-focused task is seldom conducted at the university. Thus, the study investigating pair work might be very useful for L2 teachers in Banda Aceh design group learners effectively to improve learners' English proficiency.

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Appendix A

Directions: The following text comes from a student's essay. On each numbered line there is ONE error of grammar, word order, vocabulary or spelling. There are no punctuation mistakes. Find the mistake on each numbered line, UNDERLINE it and WRITE the correction in the space provided to the right of the text.

0	My boyfriend's name is Francesco. He's <u>22 years</u> but he's	.22 years old
0	quite mature for his age. He <u>works</u> for 3 years in a bank.	.has worked/has been working
1	Our relationship <u>has begun</u> two years ago and now I know	.has been beggining for
2	him very well, but I <u>must to</u> be frank, at first I was only	.but I have to be frank
.3	interested <u>in</u> his looks. He has black short hair and brown	.interested on his looks
4	eyes. He isn't very tall but he's <u>more tall</u> than me. I don't	.taller than
5	think <u>is</u> particularly good-looking, but he has something	He has particularly
6	that <u>make</u> him a special person to me.	.makes
7	He has <u>a character very complex</u>. He's usually very sweet	.he has a very complex character
8	and kind to me and always listens my problems <u>but</u> he gets	.and he gets
9	<u>hungry</u> very quickly, especially with his parents. This is	.angry
10	because he has a stressful work and he <u>is</u> always tired.	.he always tired
11	He's generous to everyone he <u>knows</u>, but sometime he's	.know

12	too much generous and his friends take advantage of <u>him</u>.	.of it
13	But the <u>worse</u> thing about Francesco is his jealousy. If I	.worst
14	<u>just</u> look at another man he goes mad. He would like marry	_(no "just")
15	me, but I <u>say</u> him that I'll only marry him if he learns to trust me	.told him

Name   :Lely & Olin

Time taken   :16.05

Source: First year exam preparation and practice. Retrieved September 16th, 2013 from
http://host.uniroma3.it/linguisti/lcs-ingles/Roma3/Resources_files/botsford%20boyd%20B1%20prep.pdf

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