Now you're talking! Peer interaction in primary English education

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Abstract

Although teachers may be reticent to encourage children in primary education to talk to their partners for fear of losing control in the classroom, oral interaction has been proven to be essential in teaching learners *how* to interact and use the language. This study illustrates how oral interaction activities with learners in a Grade 4 primary English classroom in an English as a foreign language classroom in Portugal were able to support each other's language production. A total of 18 pre-A1 learners were recorded taking part in a spot-the-difference information gap activity. Recordings were transcribed and analysed qualitatively for learning opportunities. Results show that more able learners were able to scaffold their less-able peers, that learners listened to their partners and responded appropriately and were on task. In addition they supplied each other with vocabulary, co-constructed utterances and modelled language. In spite of the occasional use of L1 principally for social interaction and to manage the task, the task itself was carried out in the target language. The paper finishes by discussing implications for the classroom, such as which tasks can be used, how learners can be paired, how the classroom can be managed and how assessment can be conducted.

1. INTRODUCTION

Children have an innate drive to connect to people and communicate meaning through speech, and this "instinct for interaction and talk" is an aptitude Halliwell (1992, p. 8) suggests should be harnessed by teachers. When they start learning a foreign language, children want to use it to show their teacher and parents what they have learned, and this is important in motivating young learners, who want immediate results. However, although teachers may ask learners to produce language via short oral presentations, or may briefly interact with individual learners themselves, many lack the confidence to implement peer oral interaction in the classroom. Some worry that learners may repeat and reinforce errors, others worry about noise levels and others still that learners will use too much L1 or go off-task. Notwithstanding, research has proven the value of oral interaction in the learning process, and the purpose of this article is to highlight the advantages of peer interaction for learning in the primary English classroom, and suggest how teachers can best implement it in their lessons. It starts by giving a brief overview of the theory related to the topic and goes on to give examples of how peer interaction amongst children in primary English education can create learning opportunities. It concludes by discussing the practical implications of introducing peer interaction in the classroom.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: PEER INTERACTION IN THE CLASSROOM

Oral interaction, which can be defined as "the spoken language that takes place between two or more people and … is the type of speaking and listening that occurs in real time" (Oliver & Philp, 2014, p.5), is a key skill in the teaching and learning of a foreign language. It involves listening to a partner, responding appropriately and turn taking. Interaction provides an occasion for learners to "grapple with the target language at a more challenging level" (Philp et al., 2008, p.12), and in an EFL context, where there may be few opportunities to use the target language outside formal education, interaction in the classroom could be learners' only chance to use

spoken language communicatively. Primary learners however are initially unable to interact, except in well-rehearsed situations, and speaking begins with the production of rhymes, tongue-twisters and songs. However, over time, learners can move onto interacting using chunks of language with their teacher and colleagues. This prefabricated language is stored as a single unit (Kersten, 2015), thereby making retrieval more economical. More mechanical activities involving repetition of these chunks are necessary in the early stages of learning to enable learners to memorise language, but as they gain a greater range of vocabulary and grammatical structures, more challenging oral tasks will allow them to recombine these to create their own utterances, developing new language competence (Kersten, 2015).

Peer interaction involves learners interacting with each other, which greatly increases learner talking time and is more symmetrical, as it gives learners the opportunity to interact with others at a similar level of cognitive and social development, benefiting them socially, academically and culturally (Oliver & Philp, 2014). This type of interaction also allows peers to adopt new conversational roles (Philp et al., 2014). For example, peers can help their partners produce language, or correct them, functions they would never use when interacting with a teacher. Shyer students often feel more at ease when speaking to a classmate, meaning they are more likely to take risks with language, and increased talking time can make speech more automatic, thereby improving fluency (Oliver & Philp, 2014). Teachers who promote peer interaction create more learner-centred classrooms promoting learner autonomy, and as learners enjoy talking to their classmates, peer interaction could promote learner motivation.

From a cognitive perspective, research shows that during oral interaction, learners are exposed to the meaningful comprehensible input necessary to acquire language (Krashen, 1985). Long, (1981, 1996) suggests that when there is a breakdown in communication, the use of clarification requests, comprehension and confirmation checks, repetition and positive or negative feedback, known as negotiation for meaning (NfM), pushes learners to produce more accurate output

leading to learning. Although most research on the use of interactional strategies has been carried out on adults, studies have shown how primary learners are also able to negotiate for meaning. Oliver (2009) showed that, when compared to adults, 8-13 year old learners in an English as a second language (ESL) setting negotiated for meaning, but used fewer confirmation checks and other repetition, that is, they were more concerned in making meaning clear for themselves than their partner, and attributed this to the egocentric nature of the age group. More recently, in an English as a foreign language (EFL) setting, Lázaro-Ibarrola and Azpilicueta-Martínez (2015) working with 7-8 year old learners showed that although these learners did use interaction strategies, the overall number used was much lower than that reported for older learners, which the authors attributed to their very low level of proficiency and the scarcity of interaction opportunities in the EFL context. On the other hand, García- Mayo and Lázaro-Ibarrola (2015), showed how 8-9 year old EFL learners negotiated more and used L1 less frequently than 10-11 year olds, which they attributed to the more positive attitude of the younger group, who tried harder and were more willing to participate.

Swain (1995), points to the importance of output, and believes that interaction affords learners an occasion to actively engage with language, requiring them to focus more carefully on grammatical processing, thereby developing their syntax and morphology. It is also believed that as learners actively engage with language during interaction "they have to work out how the target language system 'works' when they need it to express what they want to say and when they want to make sense to others." (Oliver & Philp, 2014, p.33). Interaction also gives them the opportunity to experiment with new language and receive either positive or negative feedback from their partner. Other researchers believe that interaction is necessary for learning, with some believing that learning does not occur through interaction, but that interaction *is* learning (Swain & Lapkin, 1998).

From a socio-cognitive perspective, researchers believe that learning takes place through social interaction, and that the new language learners manifest while interacting with others is eventually internalised, so learners can use these new

forms and functions autonomously. The help learners receive from a stronger student or the teacher to produce language is termed scaffolding, (Wood et al., 1976), and studies have shown how young learners are capable of scaffolding each other's language production during interaction (Gagné & Parks, 2013; Oliver et al., 2017).Unskilled learners require the support of a more capable other through scaffolding, and evidence suggests that primary learners are capable of scaffolding each other's language production during interaction. Oliver et al., (2017) working with 5–8 and 9–12 year old English as an additional language (EAL) learners, reported that both age groups were able to support language learning, not only by negotiating for meaning, but also by asking and answering each other's questions, and co-constructing utterances. Pinter (2007) showed how a spot-the-difference oral task offered multiple benefits to the two 10-year-old EFL learners involved, who were able to support one another's language production through questions, answers, and translation, and who reported feeling more relaxed and confident about using English. Although it is true that the studies consider a variety of age groups in diverse learning contexts, they serve to illustrate the fact that interaction does play a role in children's language learning.

This section considered the theoretical background related to the rationale for using peer interaction. The following section presents examples of peer interaction in primary classrooms in Portugal, and demonstrates how interaction could promote language learning.

3. METHODOLOGY

In Portugal, primary education spans 4 years of formal education, from the ages of 6 to 10. In state schools, English is compulsory from year 3 and is taught by specialist English teachers. Learners study at least 2 hours of English per week although learners in private schools often have more contact with the language. Teachers follow curricular recommendations set out in a Ministry of Education document (Direção Geral de Educação, 2018), which highlights the need for a focus

on both spoken production and spoken interaction in the primary English classroom.

The following examples of peer interaction were recorded in two 4th year classes with learners in the 9-10 age group in a private school in Lisbon, where learners studied English for 2 hours per week. A total of 36 pre-A1 learners completed 3 spot-the-difference activities designed to reflect classwork, and in all 3 tasks the objective was to find 6 differences. Learners were not provided with any specific language to use, although the tasks were modelled by the English teacher and the researcher. All students completed the task simultaneously as a normal part of class work, but only 3 randomly-chosen pairs per group were taped. Recordings were then transcribed and analysed qualitatively for opportunities for learning.

4. RESULTS

Excerpt 1 below shows two learners interacting in the first spot-the-difference task involving two different pictures of monsters, used to practise the vocabulary of parts of the body. Values in brackets refer to pauses in seconds.

Excerpt 1

Turn	Student	
1	A	It's your turn
2	B	My monster (4.0). *Como é que se diz (.) in Inglês olhos*? [How do you say eyes in English?]
3	A	What?
4	B	*Olhos in Inglês*? [eyes in English?]
5	A	Yes
6	B	Eyes. My monster…
7	A	Have
8	B	one have eyes. One have
9	A	(3.0). My monster have one eyes.
10	B	OK, no different.
11	A	It is not different (2.0).OK this is my turn. My monster (…) have a one arm. One arm.
12	B	My monster han one arm
13	A	OK it is not different. My monster, ai it is your turn
14	B	My monster (3.0) er (3.0) *como é que se diz cabelo in Inglês*? [How do you say hair in English?]
15	A	Did you help me? What is cabelo in English? OK? *Percebeste*? (2.0) *Va, diz isso.* [Do you understand? Go on, say it]
16	B	*Mas como é que se diz*? [But how do you say it?]

17	A	It is hair
18	B	(2.0) My monster (6.0) han (mutual laughter)
19	A	My monster **have**
20	B	My monster have hair.

In this excerpt we can see how learner B repeatedly requests assistance from learner A, who acts as a language expert. As well as supplying the vocabulary B needs to complete his turns, A co-constructs B's utterance in turn 7 by supplying the verb B needs to complete his sentence. In turn 19, A is successful in correcting B's pronunciation of the verb in turn 18 (although the form is incorrect) and in turn 14, when B asks 'How do you say hair in English?' rather than providing the answer, she prompts him with a translation of his question, encouraging him to use the target language. Even though B's attention is focused on meaning rather than form, and he fails to ask the questions in English, he is able to produce a comprehensible utterance about his monster in turn 20. In this way learner A is able to assist B to take part in the interaction through scaffolding, and the language used in the task could be internalised by B who may be able to use it independently in the future. Simultaneously, the occasion to produce output on A's part could provide her with an opportunity for language development. We can also see the fun learners have during this interaction. In turn 6, learner B requires help with the word 'have' to complete his turn. In turn 12 he again has problems with the verb and the 6 second pause before his failed attempt to produce the verb in turn 18 results in mutual laughter.

Excerpt 2 shows learners taking part in another spot-the-difference task, this one based on food vocabulary.

Excerpt 2

Turn	Student	
1	C	(8.0)There is, there are (2.0) three tomatoes in my table.
2	D	In my table there are two tomatoes.
3	C	*Ponhas so tu* ? [Do you just want to note it?](4.0). *Es tu, es tu*[It's you, it's you]
4	D	In my table two cakes
5	C	Oh in my table there is one cake. *Tu es mais gordinha* (laughs) [You're fatter].
6	D	In my table there is one chicken
7	C	Oh in my table there is one chicken
8	D	In my table there is …
9	C	Two cola? One?
10	D	Cheese
11	C	In my table there is, there is one cheese
12	D	In my table there is one bunch the three bananas. *Un cacho de três bananas.* [A bunch of three bananas].

Here were can see how learner C in turn 1 self corrects and how she suggests vocabulary to enable learner D to continue his utterance in turn 9, although this suggestion is rejected in turn 10. It also shows how learner D supports his partner's learning in turn 12 by using translation to give proactive assistance. Finally it again illustrates how learners can have fun during peer interaction, illustrated by learner C's use of humour in turn 5.

Finally excerpt 3 again shows learner interaction focusing on vocabulary of parts of the body.

Excerpt 3

Turn	Student	
14	E	(4.0) My monster...my monster has got aiiiiii
15	F	has got...
16	E	has got one mouth
17	F	Yes (3.0) *Está quase tudo igual dos meus* [It's almost all the same as mine] Have you found six differences?
18	R	No, *nem se quer encontramos uma.* [No, we haven't even found one]
19	F	OK, keep going then
20	R	My monster it's two feets
21	F	(4.0) yes
22	E	(Laughs)
23	F	Ah (2.0) my monster it's two foot
24	E	feet. *Deves dizer* feet [You should say feet]
25	F	My monster has got two feet
26	E	Yes. *Uma, uma,* [one, one] my monster has...has got ... has got one...nose.
27	F	

In this sequence, learner E has difficulty completing her utterance in turn 14, but the use of prompting by learner F in turn 15, where he repeats 'has got', gives E thinking time and allows her to continue and finish her utterance in turn 16. Then in turn 25, F explicitly corrects E's inaccurate use of foot to express the plural form, which learner E incorporates into her sentence in turn 27. In this excerpt we can also see how interaction provides a space for learners to experiment with language and try out different forms, which may eventually lead to learning. In turns 14 and 15 both learners use the correct verbal form 'has got'. However in turns 21 and 24 both use 'it's' before both resorting to the correct form again in turns 26 and 27, which they then continue to use through the dialogue.

The introduction to this article mentioned that teachers are often wary of using peer interaction as they fear learners will go off-task, use L1 instead of the target language and repeat errors. However, we can see from these 3 excerpts that not only did learners work collaboratively, were on task and took relevant turns, but that more capable learners could perform the role of language expert, scaffolding the language learning of a weaker colleague. If we look carefully at the use of L1, we can see that the L1 was used when learners requested help, commented on task management (for example to talk about turn-taking), for social interaction and to

proactively help a partner through translation. The task itself however was carried out in English and this is in line with findings of other researchers who have reported the use of L1 in oral tasks to manage the task, focus attention on language and to interact personally (Swain & Lapkin, 2000). Although learners output was not always accurate, the interaction provided them with an occasion to recall key vocabulary, experiment with language, learn from their mistakes, communicate meaning, make language their own, and to have fun, all of which facilitate language learning.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

5.1 Tasks for the classroom

Before peer interaction takes place, teachers need to ensure the activities planned are meaningful, age appropriate and require interaction. Simply sitting children side by side and asking them to interact will not be successful if they have no reason to do so. This means the activities ideally need to have an information gap so children have a real need to exchange information. Asking two children to find out what colour their pencils/pens/ pencil cases are will lead to interaction, but this is not meaningful if learners can see what colour they are without asking. Instead, give each learner two identical pictures with these items, ask them to colour the first without letting their partner see, then get them to ask each other and complete the second blank picture using their partners' colours. This way there is a real need to ask, and a game-type quality to the activity, making it much more realistic and fun. Obviously the interaction here will be quite mechanical, but this type of oral repetition is what beginners need to remember both concept and language (Dunn, 2013). However, with time, learners should have the opportunity to use language more freely, to form their own utterances and make their own meaning, as this will facilitate the development of communication strategies and further language learning. Some examples of information gap activities for young learners, moving from more controlled to those which give freer practice are:

a) Grid activities. The grids in this type of activity, one for each student, consist of a number of boxes which contain different, incomplete information (which could be as simple as a number or letter). Learners can then ask 'What's in A2?'etc. and use this information to complete their grid. Figure 1 below shows an example of a grid activity used to practise ordinal numbers and months.

Student A				
	1	2	3	4
A	8/6	12/11		
B		2/2	4/7	
C			3/8	6/10

Student B				
	1	2	3	4
A			1/5	10/3
B	11/1			21/9
C	23/4	30/12		

Figure 1.A grid activity to practise ordinal numbers and months

b) Mingling activities. Here learners stand up and mingle, asking and answering questions, as they would while doing a survey. Some could then be asked to share their findings with the class.

c) Role-play. Scripted role plays such as interviews or a conversation in a café can be useful to automatize language chunks and recall vocabulary. However, giving learners the opportunity to create their own language through semi-scripted role-plays (where they can use a framework but introduce their own ideas), or a role-play which involves using language spontaneously, provides a greater opportunity for learners to make sense of language.

d) Spot-the-difference activities. Here learners' pictures are almost the same, but there are a number of differences which they need to identify without looking at each other's images. The images should be clear, simple and not include too many differences.

e) Picture dictation. Learners each have a different image, for example they might both have drawn a picture of a friend or their bedroom. They then sit back to back and take turns to describe their picture, which their partner attempts to draw.

5.2 Classroom management

As stated at the beginning of this article, young children have a natural aptitude for talk and interaction. When they begin learning a foreign language they expect to use the language, and can quickly become demotivated when they realise they can say very little. So including interaction activities in the classroom not only leads to language learning, but satisfies the need of both parents and children for tangible outcomes.

Crucial for successful classroom interaction is a supportive atmosphere where learners are not afraid of making mistakes, and where learners are given positive feedback for effort and completion of tasks. Shim et al., (2013), working with middle school students showed that a more positive classroom peer climate led to learners engaging in more help seeking from their partners, as did the learners in the 3 excerpts above.

Classroom management of such tasks is key to success. Teachers should start by introducing the task and explaining both the real-life purpose (finding all 6 differences in the spot-the-difference activity) and the language learning purpose (to practice their speaking and communication in English). By helping children understand the learning objective of an activity, practitioners can raise children's language awareness, leading to more effective learning (Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015).

Teachers need to give instructions in a clear, simple fashion and aim to give short chunks of instructions, otherwise children's attention may wander. The activity should be demonstrated with the teacher and a strong student, then again with two students, and instructions checked. Children also need to be reminded of the rules

of pairwork and these could be displayed on the classroom wall. Appropriate rules would be:

I. Help each other

II. If your partner can't help, put up your hand and the teacher will help

III. Use spy voices (Voice charts to illustrate this are readily available to download from the internet and put on your classroom wall).

IV. Take turns and listen to your partner

A final step would be to elicit the necessary language and write this on the board. Only then will any necessary materials be distributed and learners paired up. During the task itself, teachers should monitor learner interaction and be prepared to intervene if students need additional scaffolding. As they monitor, teachers may hear children making mistakes. This needs to be handled sensitively as the teacher's objective is to encourage learners to communicate, and motivate them to do so. Depending on the type of error, teachers can either ignore it, make a mental note to address the problem in another class, or indicate the language on the board for discussion after the task. Positive reinforcement both during and at the end of the activity is important, both of content and language. For example if the activity is a board game with questions to ask a partner, the teacher should first address what information the learners discovered about their partner(s) and then praise what was good about language use or highlight areas for improvement. It is also important that the teacher asks a few pairs to perform the activity for their peers to finish off the task. Another important consideration is how long the activity will take. Too long and children's interest will wane, too short and they will not get enough practice, so aim for a maximum of 7-10 minutes, depending on the activity.

5.3 Learner Pairings

How learners are paired is another important consideration and should be addressed at the lesson planning stage, as pairing two weaker students or two rowdy students may not results in effective interaction. A study on the ability of learners in primary education in the UK to carry out science reasoning tasks when divided into friendship pairings versus acquaintance pairings (Kutnick & Kington, 2005) showed that girl friendship pairings performed best. Conversely, boy friendship pairings performed worst, with pairings consisting of boy and girl acquaintances performing at mid-levels. When considering teacher versus self-selected pairings in the young EFL classroom, García Mayo and Imaz Agirre (2018) have shown learnings in teacher pairings are more on task than those in self-selected pairings. However, although such results may provide some guidelines, which pairings work best in class is ultimately a decision for the teacher and one which needs to be constantly monitored during interaction activities. Some possible combinations could be weaker and stronger students, or more boisterous boys with quieter girls. This might involve students temporarily moving from one seat to another, but should not require that furniture be moved.

5.4. Assessment of peer interaction

The most effective way to assess peer interaction is to use an observation grid to systematically record attitudes and oral skills, preferably using task-specific criteria. As tasks are short, it is impossible to assess every student at the same time, so the teacher should focus on 2 or 3 pairs as the class carries out an interaction task, moving closer to these pairs to unobtrusively complete the grid. An example grid is given in Appendix A. Explaining these success criteria with learners using age-appropriate language would also be beneficial and later, when learners were familiar with the criteria, they could self-assess using a simplified version.

6 CONCLUSION

Halliwell (1992, p. 11) says language is 'a fundamental part of being human' used to interact with others, but denied the opportunity to use it, learners struggle to communicate orally. Although peer interaction can be difficult to manage initially, once learners become accustomed to the rules associated with these activities, their implementation is much simpler. As we have seen above, not only are teachers concerns over how learners perform during interaction largely unfounded, but we have also seen how learners can act like the teacher to support each other's learning. Interaction is important for learners to practice language they already know, but as mentioned by Hatch (1978), it is also through interaction that language develops, and denying learners the opportunity to interact will lead to less effective learning and could result in demotivation. This is not to say that peer interaction is always successful, and teachers need to carefully monitor the relationships between learners in interaction and develop cohesion between pairs of learners and the group as a whole (Ehrman & Dornyei, 1998). The rewards in terms of learning and motivation however far outweigh any initial constraints.

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Appendix A. An observation grid to assess peer oral interaction

Complete the grid with +, +/- or –

Name	Willing to participate On task	Uses English to convey meaning	Listens to partner and takes turns	Uses acceptable pronunciation	Is appropriately fluent (i.e. lack of frequent, long pauses)	Uses appropriate vocabulary	Completes the task