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The Role of Transcribing Group Discussion Task in Promoting Autonomy and Oral Proficiency of University EFL Learners*

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Abstract

This study aimed at measuring the impact of transcribing group-discussion tasks on the development of university students' autonomy and oral proficiency. A quasi-experimental research design was followed to compare the performances of four groups: two experimental groups and two control groups (each one divided into low and high proficiency students). The study lasted for 12 weeks, and the teacher assigned a classroom oral discussion task in each session. The students were asked to form discussion groups of three or four students, with low and high proficiency learners in different groups. The participants had to record their group discussion tasks. Control groups' students had to submit their recorded conversations to their instructor, but they did not do any post-task activity. However, the experimental groups' students had to transcribe their recorded speaking tasks, to find their own and their peers' grammatical mistakes, and to correct them. Finally, while working in groups, students discussed the texts and reformulated their mistakes. Employing ANCOVA to analyze the results, researchers found that experimental groups has a better performance than the control groups on both post-tests of oral proficiency and learner autonomy. Thus, transcription followed by reflection on inaccurate production contributed to the superior performance of participants in the experimental groups.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, oral proficiency, self-correction, peer-correction, transcription

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Introduction

It is highly recommended that in university English classes, teachers devote a major part of their classroom instruction to activities that can promote beneficial language learning habits (Vickers & Ene, 2006). In their review of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Lightbown and Spada (1999) have emphasized that one of the main aspects of effective teaching is helping L2 learners notice the language forms, which can be done through various activities that direct learners' attention to forms while communicating. Similarly, Schmidt (1995) claims that the amount of input that learners pay enough attention to becomes intake in their language learning. Thus, it is essential for learners to compare their own input with the typical output according to their current interlanguage system and rules and; as a result, to find out the main difference between their current knowledge and skill and what they aim to do in future (Schmidt & Frota, 1986).

Studies conducted on the efficacy of immersion programs and content-based instructions have revealed that sole exposure to comprehensible input is not enough for developing L2 accuracy (Nassaji & Tian, 2010). Although in such contexts, learners are constantly exposed to comprehensible input, they are not accurate in certain aspects of their L2 grammar (Harley & Swain, 1984; Lapkin, Hart & Swain, 1991; Swain, 1995; Cole & Vanderplank, 2016). In this respect, Swain (1995) argues that learners in these classrooms do not have sufficient chances for focusing on language form and production. Therefore, they might realize the gap between what they already know and the native form.

However, as Cooke (2013) asserts language learners rarely like to reflect on their language production, and unless they are guided to do so, they are likely to miss opportunities to develop their interlanguage. Admitting that learners may not always notice the language forms themselves, Thornbury (1997) suggests that there is a need for pedagogical intervention to encourage noticing. Hence, SLA researchers have attempted to design particular activities that assist students pay due attention to their language production and find their

erroneous forms. These kinds of activities that particularly draw students' attention to form surely develop language learning and foster learner autonomy. For instance, to help learners notice inaccurate language structures in their own output, transcription with a follow-up self-correction has been regarded as a beneficial activity (Lynch, 2001, 2007; Mennim, 2003, 2012).

As Lynch (2001) argues, asking students to transcribe their conversations and then focus on their errors makes them externalize their understanding about the formal accuracy and semantic precision of their language. Such a post-task, which is done after the main communicative task, offers students a chance for offline feedback and reduces the stress of the speakers, making it possible for them to pay due attention to their production since they do not need to zoom on and spend energy on formulation of meaning (Lynch, 2007). Lynch's speculation has been empirically studied by Mennim in 2012. Using transcription to let students reflect on their output, his study lends supports to the idea that error correction should be considered as a shared responsibility, not merely a teacher's duty. Self-correction activities (e.g. transcription of one's output and examination of mistakes) help learners reflect on their speech after communicative event and allow learners to focus on their inaccurate L2 production.

Up to now, very many studies have been undertaken to check whether transcription of students' language output can affect their language learning (Lynch, 2001, 2007; Mennim, 2003, 2007; Stillwell et al, 2010; Cooke, 2013). These studies unanimously point to the positive effects of this post-task exercise on becoming aware of wrong language use and overall language proficiency. Thus far, however, few investigations have been conducted to empirically examine the effects of using this task on the development of second language learners' oral proficiency and level of autonomy. In addition, to the best of researcher's knowledge, there exists no extant research investigating if the benefits of transcription are different for learners with different language proficiencies.

Review of Related Literature

Cross sectional examinations of the literatures reveal many criticisms leveled against traditional classrooms. For instance, according to Sfar (1998), traditional classrooms are too transmission oriented. Citing Wolf (1994), on this basis, Burkert (2011) reminds teachers to re-conceptualize and rethink about their teaching practice. He explains that once the principles of constructivism are followed, the educational context turns into a learning workshop where learners become active researchers. Little (1991) takes a similar stance and points out that learning happens only if and to the extent that the learner can assimilate the new information with their existing experience and knowledge. Williams and Burden (1997) see teachers as mediators who help learners develop their autonomy, feel responsible for their learning, aiming to become independent thinkers and problem-solvers. Thus, not only the teacher but also the learners should take responsibility for learning (Burkert, 2011), and they are the agents of knowledge acquisition (Dam & Legenhausen, 2011; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019). However, learning a language independently would not always bring about learner autonomy (e.g. Oxford, 2003; Tapinta, 2016). Little (1991, 1999, 2007) believes autonomy is related to the learning situation, not the learner. Besides, Holliday (2003) asserted that learner autonomy exists in the social worlds of the learners, which is brought to the learning context. Moreover, Little (2007) contended that collaboration is a psychological capacity and is essential to autonomy.

Researchers stressing the social aspects of autonomy (Trinh, 2005; Benson, 2007, 2011; Dang, 2012; Oxford, 2015) argue that learner autonomy has to do with 'independence' as well as 'interdependence'. For example, Littlewood, (1999) suggested that learners who accept responsibility and enjoy communicating with others develop their autonomy through interpersonal interactions. In a similar vein, Benson (2007) described autonomy not only as taking control of one's learning but also as an interdependent and independent learning.

Trinch (2005) suggests that interdependence is undertaken when negotiating meaning, while scaffolding each other, and among learners

themselves. Social interaction is seen as an assistant to L2 learners' autonomy (Little, 2007). Therefore, improving learner autonomy hinges upon such concepts as scaffolding, group learning, and mutual teaching (Sinclair, 2009). In addition, Little (1997) argues grammar-translation method offers learners no chance to practice spontaneous target-language use in their classes, but communicative-oriented approaches mainly emphasized on language use, and left almost no room for the development of language awareness.

Little also justifies the promotion of learner autonomy on two bases. First, it enables learners to maximize their chances of learning through critical reflection and self-evaluation and to become self-reliant speakers. Thus, the major component of autonomy is conscious reflection. The significance of conscious reflection is also elaborated by other researchers (Kohonen, 1992; Lo, 2010; Dam & Legenhausen, 2011). Bearing the above ideas in mind, and relying on the principles of constructivism and sociocultural theory, this study aims at investigating the extent to which university students at different proficiency levels benefit from a follow-up post task activity in their development of oral proficiency and autonomy. In simpler terms, the effect of transcription, self-correction, peer-correction, their reflection, and evaluation of spoken production on the development of students' autonomy and oral proficiency is examined in this study. Thus, the following questions were posed.

Research Questions

1. Does transcription (followed by self-and-peer-correction task and reflective practice) influence the low and high proficiency students' oral proficiency significantly?
2. Does transcription (followed by self-and-peer-correction task and reflective practice) influence the low and high proficiency students' autonomy significantly?

Methodology

Design and participants

A quasi-experimental design was followed, including pre-test, treatment, and post-tests for oral proficiency and learner autonomy. The aim was to investigate how the transcription task along with the following self-and-peer-correction phase affected learners' level of autonomy and oral proficiency. The students in all groups received a pre-test and post-test of autonomy and oral proficiency. The experimental groups also received a treatment in the form of transcription task with the accompanying self-and-peer-correction exercise.

The participants of this study were 39 low proficiency and 38 high proficiency university students studying English language teaching at BA level in a university in Zanjan. Four intact classes were chosen, and they were given an Oxford Proficiency Test (OPT). Then, learners were assigned into different discussion groups in these classes (low groups and high groups, 3 to 4 students in each group) to perform the required tasks. From 106 learners in these four classes, the data gathered from 77 learners were analyzed, and the data from 29 intermediate learners was not taken into account. The participants were both males and females, between 19–25 years old.

Instruments

A standardized LPT test (i.e. Oxford Placement Test) containing 100 multiple choice questions on reading, grammar, and vocabulary was used to determine the overall English language proficiency of the participants and assign them into low and high groups. Students who answered 30-50 out of 100 questions were considered as low, and those who answered 80-100 were considered as high proficiency group.

Two oral proficiency tests (Oxford Oral Proficiency Test) with the same structure were administered to gauge the oral language proficiency of the students. One of the oral tests was used as pre-test, and the second test was used as a post-test. The oral tests followed IELTS speaking test format and included interview and picture-cued items. The interview consisted of general and introductory questions

and questions about five different topics. The tests were rated by two experienced raters (the researchers in this study) relying on a validated analytic scale called 'Interview Scoring Profile' (Khabiri, 2003). The scale is divided into grammar and vocabulary section, discourse management part, pronunciation, and interactive communication. It must be emphasized that the inter-rater reliability was calculated after rating ten interviews (0.78).

In order to examine the participants' level of autonomy, a questionnaire developed and validated by Zhang and Li (2004) was used. The questionnaire which includes 21 items comes in a five-point Likert scale form. The items, ranging from dependent to independent problem solving, are in line with the sociocultural perspective on autonomy. The questionnaire contains 11 items with five options in Likert scale ranging from never to always. It also contains ten questions in multiple-choice form, where the participants have to select the best answer. The scores range from 1 to 5, as a result the scores range from 21 to 105. The questionnaire was first translated into Persian and was then reviewed by two experts in TEFL. Five items were modified, and the final version was piloted with 20 university students, showing the reliability index of 0.89.

Data collection and analysis procedure

Students in all of the four groups were taught by the same professor (one of the researchers), who attempted to use the same methodology in all classes, except the main treatment. Along with the regular curriculum, throughout a period of 12 weeks, both low and high proficiency students did a classroom oral discussion task in each and every session. For this purpose, learners in experimental and control groups were divided into discussion groups of three or four. The teacher chose a discussion topic for each session, and each discussion lasted 10-15 minutes and was audio recorded. Students in the control groups had to submit the recorded discussion to their teacher and did not have to perform any post-task activity. But students in the experimental groups could access their recordings of conversations outside of class. They had to do different things such as transcribing the recorded interactions,

finding and highlighting their own and their peers' errors, and finally correcting them. Prior to doing the next recording, they were required to hold a meeting, giving feedback to each other, discussing the accuracy of their transcription and explaining their choices, and finding out the best option for reshaping and correcting their committed errors. If there still existed some errors in learners' transcripts and were not noticed, the teacher corrected it himself. Following Cooke (2013), some 30% of the learners' final mark was given based on the completion of these post-task activities so as to encourage and motivate the students to engage in performing the exercises throughout the treatment.

Results

The oral proficiency, general language proficiency, and autonomy level scores belonging to all the four groups of students were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 21. First, the assumption of the normality of the data was checked through Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Since the results revealed that the data were normally distributed, a parametric test was used in testing the research hypotheses. To statistically control for the effect of pre-test scores (covariate) on post-test scores, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) procedure was conducted. ANCOVA is commonly used in quasi-experimental designs and provides a way of statistically controlling for the effect of pretest differences. ANCOVA increases the statistical power by reducing the error variance and allows the researcher to control for the effects of other covariates or nuisance variables (Dörnyei, 2007).

The results of the mean scores for each group are presented in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, learners of high proficiency obtained higher mean scores in autonomy and oral proficiency tests. The mean scores of the learners in experimental groups were higher than the mean scores of the learners in the control groups. This indicated the participants in experimental groups improved because of doing self-and-peer correction task regardless of their proficiency level.

Table 1 *post-test mean scores for each group*

| Level/Group | Mean Autonomy | Mean oral proficiency |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| High proficiency/ Control | 79.139 | 38.617 |
| High proficiency/ Experimental | 87.873 | 41.367 |
| Low proficiency/ Control | 63.561 | 19.781 |
| Low proficiency/ Experimental | 71.827 | 23.334 |

Regarding the first research question, as shown in Table 2, the results indicated that the groups' oral proficiency scores significantly differed from pre- to post-tests (covariate, $F = 43.635$, $p = .000$). Furthermore, the mean scores of the experimental groups significantly differed from those of the control groups, ($F = 44.154$, $p = .000$). In other words, transcription task followed by self- and peer- correction significantly influenced students' oral proficiency scores. However, the main effect of language proficiency was not significant ($F = .424$, $p = .626$). That is, both low and high proficiency students benefitted equally from self- and peer-correction task. In addition, the interaction between group (control versus experimental groups) and proficiency level (low and high proficiency students) was not significant ($F = .194$, $p = .661$).

Table 2 *ANCOVA results for oral proficiency*

| Source of variation | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Eta Squared |
|---------------------|----------------|--------|-------------|---------|------|-------------|
| Intercept | 153.166 | 1 | 153.166 | 155.673 | .000 | .675 |
| Covariate | 43.218 | 1 | 43.218 | 43.635 | .000 | .368 |
| group | 8.489 | 1 | 8.489 | 44.154 | .000 | .978 |
| level | .084 | 1 | .084 | .424 | .626 | .283 |
| group * level | .192 | 1 | .192 | .194 | .661 | .003 |
| Error | 148.568 | 152.09 | 2.364 | | | |
| Total | 353.717 | 157.09 | | | | |

The second research question addressed the effect of transcription task followed by self- and peer-correction on the participants' level of

autonomy. As indicated in Table 3, the groups' autonomy scores significantly differed from pre- to post-tests (covariate, $F = 89.681$, $p = .000$). In addition, the effect of transcription task followed by self- and peer-correction task on students' autonomy scores was significant, ($F = 1651.957$, $p = .016$). The effect of language proficiency level was also significant ($F = 26.865$, $p = .000$) suggesting that high and low proficiency learners' autonomy scores significantly differed from each other. However, the interaction between group (control versus experimental groups) and proficiency levels (low and high proficiency) was not significant ($F = .279$, $p = .599$) meaning that, the effect of the self- and peer-correction task did not override the main effects. In other words, regardless of their language proficiency levels, all the students benefited equally from self- and peer-correction tasks.

Table 3 ANCOVA results for level of autonomy

| Source of variation | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Eta Squared |
|---------------------|----------------|---------|-------------|----------|------|-------------|
| Intercept | 131.581 | 1 | 131.581 | 25.159 | .000 | .655 |
| Covariate | 351.576 | 1 | 351.576 | 89.681 | .000 | .545 |
| group | 1805.000 | 1 | 1805.000 | 1651.957 | .016 | .999 |
| level | 94.677 | 1 | 94.677 | 26.865 | .000 | .275 |
| group * level | 1.093 | 1 | 1.093 | .279 | .599 | .004 |
| Error | 514.56 | 106.216 | 13.767 | | | |
| Total | 2898.427 | 111.216 | | | | |

Overall, the results indicate that participants in experimental groups (both high and low proficiency groups) benefitted from the transcription of their oral output which was accompanied by self-and-

peer-correction exercise, cooperative reflection, and reformulating their language errors.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the effects of transcription followed by self and peer-correction activities on the development of low and high proficiency students' oral proficiency and level of autonomy. It was found that learners gained considerable benefits from engaging in such post-task exercises. The analyses of the data was indicative of significant differences between the experimental and control groups, both for low and high proficiency students, suggesting that transcribing the oral output with a follow up self-and-peer-correction exercise improved Iranian foreign learners' autonomy and oral proficiency. Thus, the findings provided good evidence to the effectiveness of developing learner autonomy in teaching oral proficiency.

These findings support the claims made by other researchers about the effects of engaging L2 learners in the transcription of their oral output after communicative tasks on the accuracy of the focused forms produced later (e.g. Lynch, 2001, 2007; Mennim, 2003, 2007; Stillwell et al, 2010). Such noticing activities as the post-task activities employed in this study, according to Ellis (2003), have the potential to draw students' attention to the structures and forms used wrongly in the main task. In this regard, explicit knowledge "serves to prime the intake through noticing and to feed the internal monitoring that arises when learners notice the gap between their output and what they know consciously" (Ellis, 2003, p. 149). The post-task activities utilized in this study gave the learners a greater chance for interaction and negotiation of meaning. In feedback sessions, the content of the task is in fact the language itself, so students communicated together to come up with the way certain features of language function (Ellis, 2003).

From another perspective, the findings can be clarified in light of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD). ZPD refers to the distance between the current and the next level of one's development as determined (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). As it was mentioned before, participants of the experimental groups discussed their identified errors

and endeavored to reshape them in their group discussions while talking in feedback sessions. The recorded data of the feedback sessions were not reported in this paper, but the study showed that collaborative corrections and reformulating the language outputs brought about learners' engagement in meta-talks which were beneficial for the participants. Because learners are strong in different areas of the target language, they managed to provide their peers with useful feedback on problematic areas in their groups (Mennim, 2003; Lynch, 2007). From a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), it is this very interaction that assists less capable learners to increase their language knowledge and helps more capable learners to improve their current knowledge while helping their lower level peers (Nassaji & Tian, 2010). Moreover, the social interaction happening between learners and teacher and among learners themselves in the process of negotiating meaning and scaffolding accounts for the development of learners' autonomy and enables them to take more responsibility for their own learning (Trinch, 2005; Little, 1996). Thus, in this view, learners can develop their autonomy in a socially mediated process (Benson, 2007).

It was further found that despite the nature of *autonomy*, it consists of self-directed and socially-mediated learning aspects. Collaborative and group work where learners negotiate meaning with their peers and then perform follow up individual or collaborative post-tasks is useful in improving thinking and autonomy of the students. These exercises will not only assist students evaluate self and peer performances, but will also help them to "step out of their shoes of passive recipients of knowledge and take a different perspective looking at their learning from a meta-level" (Burkert, 2011, p. 145). They also enable the learners in becoming independent learners who are real thinkers and problem-solvers. As Little (2007) rightly pointed out communicative competence develops as a result of engagement in an interactive process. When learners' autonomy is an educational objective, teachers must develop an interactive dynamic atmosphere in their classes so as to develop both communicative proficiency as well as learner autonomy. "Autonomy in language learning and autonomy in language

use are two sides of the same coin” (p. 26). Therefore, autonomy needs to be placed at the heart of both theory and practice of language teaching and learning and must not be seen as an 'optional extra' (Little, 2007).

Conclusion and Implications

In this study, the researchers aimed to examine the effects that transcribing the oral output followed by self-and-peer-correction of incorrect language forms might have on low and high proficiency students' performances on oral proficiency test and level of autonomy. It was found that this exercise greatly increased the low and high proficiency students' oral proficiency and level of autonomy.

The results of the current study offer fruitful implications and suggestions for teaching English in Iran. Recent investigations show that the educational system of English language in Iran is primarily "transmission oriented and memorization-based" (Abednia & Izadinia, 2013, p. 3). In most of the English classes held in Iranian universities, learners are not actively involved in the creation of knowledge, and these classes mostly hinges on learning grammatical structures and memorization of and vocabulary items (Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010). However, in certain classes where communicative language teaching is adopted for promoting the communication skills of Iranian language learners, teachers do not pay enough attention to students' errors (Jafari, Ketabi, & Tavakoli, 2016). Although the approach taken in this study may not be welcomed in Iran where various educational and social constraints impede the implementation of autonomy-supportive strategies (Nasri, Vahid Dastjerdy, Eslami Rasekh, & Amirian, 2015), yet there are limited opportunities for teachers to use. University English teachers and EFL teachers can inform their students of the fact that they themselves should take the responsibility for their own learning and warn them that it is not just the teacher who must take responsibility for classroom events. This can be done through assigning such autonomy-based exercises as the post-task activities suggested and studied in this research (Burkert, 2011).

A second implication of this study is that autonomous learning should be considered as an educational skill that can be taught in the

same way that other academic skills are taught. The activities that encourage the development of this skill must be also embedded in our educational programs (Railton & Watson, 2005). Thus, the real challenge for future researchers is to adapt the theoretical propositions of autonomy and adopt an empirically-grounded understanding thereof in language learning and teaching (Benson, 2007).

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