

Adult EFL Pair-work Pattern and Learners' Perception in a University Extension Program

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Abstract: *Pair-work patterns demonstrated by English language learners were being identified as 1) collaborative, 2) dominant/dominant, 3) dominant/passive, and 4) expert/novice. Related studies reported that collaborative pattern was the most beneficial and yet pair work activity might not necessarily be helpful and effective in a language classroom. The present study explored the dyadic patterns and learners' perception via pair work. Fifty adults from beginning level English conversation classes were examined over an 8-month period. Learners were randomly paired up to work on in paired tasks during which their dialogues were recorded. In addition, questionnaire and interviews were conducted to reflect their perceptions on pair work and its influence on L2 learning. Results showed that collaborative pattern were prevalent in adult learners and a passive/passive pattern which would change to a collaborative one over time was found. More importantly, learners reported that they would adjust their roles to fit in and to achieve the required task—one would shift from a dominating role to an active partner in response to a more collaborative context that facilitates learning. This inferred that even a passive partner was able to partly contribute and that further explained an identified active/passive (less active) interaction pattern rather than a dominant/passive one among adult EFL learners. In terms of comments on paired task, all participants claimed it useful in L2 learning and 90% of them credited the improved confidence to pair work activity. The researcher proposed three adult EFL pair-work patterns that revealed the population's distinct features.*

Key words: *Pair-work pattern, adult EFL learners*

Introduction

Described by Kasworm, Rose, and Ross-Gordon (2010) as “large, inchoate and complex”, the field of adult and continuing education (ACE) is vast and at times immature, and the issues ahead are too complicated to unravel. The problematic side is plain and beyond doubt, yet so is its promising side. The field of ACE is increasingly perceived as “central to personal and societal change in all spheres of life” (Knox & Fleming, 2010). The growing importance of ACE throughout the world can also be seen in, and inferred, from the following figures. According to the United States Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA, 2007), over 2.5 million adult Americans enrolled in government-funded adult education programs in year 2004

to 2005. In the United Kingdom, the proportion of adult learners has risen by 4% from 39% in 2009 to 43% in 2010, the highest level for the past decade, as reported by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) in 2010. NIACE (2010) also reported that 3 in every 5 (60%) full-time workers had learning plans, an increase of 13% since 2009. According to Holland, Pithers and Morgan (2008), the emerging global power, China, reported a huge growth in the numbers of citizens attending universities. Enrollments increased by 371%-- that is from 3.4 million to 16 million, from 1998 to 2006.

The growth of adult learners globally certainly contributes to the rising prominence of adult education, highlights the interest of adult learners, and subsequently identifies a specific learner group—adult English language learners (AELs). However, most of the studies conducted in the field of adult SLA mainly targeted populations in postsecondary educational settings with scanty research in nonacademic settings (Johnson, 2001; Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003). Mathews-Aydinli (2008) echoed this claim in her review of forty-one research studies focusing on AELs studying in nonacademic contexts. She sifted out works studying adult immigrants, refugees, migrant workers, and naturalized citizens in the States, and finally concluded that there was inadequate research being conducted on this specific population of second language learners.

Adult learners are distinctive in a way that they are more matured social members in one and that they relatively experience more socialization than their younger counterparts in another. Yet the accumulated knowledge and experience can facilitate or hinder the learning experience (Blakely & Tomlin, 2008), making adult learners a fascinating population to study. Participants in this study were working adults who attended the English course in their leisure time or non-office hours. Their solid socialization and diverse learning experience intertwined with an interactive, consensus-reaching task in an L2 context. The chemical sparked off marked the highlight of the study. Data collected in the present paper were a subset of a larger study in an adult intensive English conversation program aiming to 1) identify the patterns of peer interaction in pair work and, 2) investigate the learners' perception of pair work.

Literature Review

Peer Interaction Pattern

Important studies which meticulously examined interaction pattern in classroom have developed in the 90s. Mari (1996) proposed two modes (and two subordinate ones) of interaction and content of peer dialogues in her study. She discovered various discourse patterns and arranged them on a scale of collaborative discourse ranging from “Knowledge transmission” at one end to the more interactive “Learning from each other” at the other end. According to Mari's identification, “Knowledge transmission” mode demonstrated a dominant feature with one doing most of the work and without much discussion between peers. In contrast, “Learning from each other” pair showed collaboration and equal contribution throughout the task. Mari also

mentioned two other modes recognized between the extremes—one pair “took turns equally and collaborated throughout task completions but not to the same degree” (p. 116) was identified in the “Learning from each other” mode, another pair had “the task completion equally shared by both parties” (p.117). These two modes were not independently labeled and not fully distinguishable or mutually exclusive. Though Mari’s (1996) identified mode was not thoroughly comprehensive, it laid a foundation for the successive studies.

In a more detailed and organized fashion, Storch (2002) conducted a longitudinal investigation into the nature of dyadic interaction in an adult ESL classroom in which she found four distinct patterns of interaction amongst pairs. The four patterns, illustrated in Table 1, were collaborative, dominant/dominant, dominant/passive, and expert/novice respectively.

Table 1

Storch’s (2002) identified patterns of interaction in ESL pair work

| Pattern Type | Characteristics |
|---------------------|--|
| Collaborative | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Willingness to offer and engage with each other’s ideas ● Discussion, mutual solution |
| Dominant / dominant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High level of disagreements; reaching no consensus |
| Dominant / passive | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Authoritarian vs subservient role; little or no negotiation |
| Expert / novice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The more capable peer encourages the less capable partner ● Little negotiation |

Storch discovered that collaborative pattern was the predominant one among the four. And result suggested that patterns of dyadic interaction remain unchanged over time and across given tasks, a contrastive finding to other researchers (Matoba, 2005; Kim & McDonough, 2008) as well as a contingent phenomenon observed among adults learners in this study. To note, in her study of Japanese Junior High School English learners, Matoba (2005) identified a passive/passive pattern which was absent from Storch’s (2002) research. She explained the two passive/passive instances as a result of participants’ emotion. Participants might be too focused and cared too much about their own performance and failed to interact freely with their peers. Or they might be emotionally affected and lose interest caused by events happened outside the classroom.

Learners’ Perception on Pair work

As a highly interactive task by nature, the use of pair work is prevalent in education and the dynamics of pair behavior were extensively explored (e.g., Ohta, 2001). Earlier studies have notable observations and negative feedback reported. Zhang's (1995) pointed out that learners oftentimes experienced the lack of trust of accuracy from their peers. More are found in Le (2003) and Hyde (1993)'s findings in which they both reported negative comments to pair work (or group work) from their young adult interviewees. Participant in Le's (2003) study expressed frustration due to conflicts in the task while another learner found it stressful to keep up with his/her peers and at the same time trying to voice out his/her ideas. Watanabe (2008) also made a point on the negative attitude demonstrated by her participants who experienced dominant/passive and expert/passive interaction. The participants candidly expressed disappointment because there was no discussion in their pair work. Numerous researchers even argue that learners may not reckon their peers to be useful resources for language learning, but rely upon their teachers (e.g. Davis, 1997; Mackey, McDonough, Fuji & Tatsumi, 2001; Williams, 1999).

Research Questions

1. What pair-work patterns among working adult EFL were identified?
2. What were the perceptions of working adult EFL on pair-work activity?

Methodology

Participants

The data were collected in an adult English conversation class in a University extension program in Taiwan, Taipei. A total of fifty learners from all walks of life were observed, with an average age of 31. In terms of gender, eighteen of them are males and thirty-two are females. Regarding their academic background, over 80% of them finished university, six graduated from vocational high school and four earned a master degree. Chinese is their native language.

Data collection

Applying a qualitative approach, one of the researchers served as the participant observer collected in-class interaction data for eight months. Learners were paired up randomly either by the teacher or the student themselves for the pair-work task when necessary. Conversations between the two during the dyadic task were then recorded. The designed dyadic task consisted of guided dialogues and role play. Guided dialogues required the paired participants to make up a short talk with a given opening sentence. The content of the short talk should fulfill several conditions instructed by the teacher such as including a tense form or a sentence pattern they just learnt. Assigned role plays in the study were short talks or dialogues from the English textbook series, *Top Notch Fundamentals* (Saslow & Ascher, 2006). The role play tasks might vary in

ways of operation based on the participants' ability and readiness. In any forms of this task, the teacher would first assist the participants with the pronunciation and meaning of new vocabulary or phrases, and then participants proceeded to one of the following activities: (1) participants took turns taking up the roles to read out the dialogue or in another; (2) participants replaced some of the information in the dialogue with words or phrases they knew or just being taught.

A total of seventy-three dyads were recorded. In addition, fifty questionnaires designed in accordance with Guttman's (1994) scalogram method were distributed and received in valid. Participants were given a choice of "Yes", "No", and "Not sure" for each item. To improve the reliability of the questionnaire and more importantly, to elicit participants' perception on pair work and peer learning in class, participants (who filled out the questionnaire) were also requested to write down the reason for their choice. And they were told that it was not an evaluation of this course or of the teacher.

Both unstructured and semi-structured interviews were also conducted. Twenty-five participants attended the interview. Researcher's observation notes were as well referred.

Data Analysis

For answering Research Question One, the data were analyzed and classified based on Storch (2002)'s peer interaction pattern framework. Finally, interviews with participants, questionnaires and observation journals from the researcher were presented to address Research Question Two.

Findings

1. Adult EFL Pair Work Patterns

Out of the seventy-three dyads, seventy-one of them showed a collaborative pattern and two revealed a passive/passive style which was absent in Storch's (2002) proposed framework. To note, one of the passive/passive patterns changed to collaborative over the learning process. Gem and Joe were paired up randomly for the first time when the two shared a complete silence of some three minutes. Gem finally broke the ice and Joe, on and off, threw out ideas. The passive pair was deliberately paired up again a week later. They kicked off the discussion once they got together and the two interacted actively and collaboratively throughout the entire task. Another passive pair, however, did not demonstrate a dramatic change at their second match-up. Interestingly though, the pair (Chen and Katy) remained passively engaged, shared some tacit understanding, and produced a fairly good organized piece of classwork. There was a potential that passive/passive pattern among working adult EFL could be both explicitly and implicitly collaborative.

Table 2 showed the number of the identified patterns. Collaborative patterns detected among working adult learners involved abundant of idea exchanging, IRF (initial, response, and feedback), and negotiation.

Table 2 Patterns of peer interaction identified in the recorded dyads

| Types of interactive pattern | Collaborative | Dominant / Dominant | Dominant / Passive | Expert / Novice | Passive / Passive | Total |
|------------------------------|---------------|---------------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-------|
| No. | 71 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 73 |

The seventy-three recorded dyads represented over 60% of the actual number of paired tasks done during the 8-month period. Not every paired conversation was recorded as it should be understood that learners feel uncomfortable or even offended to be recorded on their first day of class without knowing what and why; and the recording work only began from the fifth and sixth lesson when the learners managed to build up a degree of trust with the teacher and among themselves. However, the researcher believed it was the performance of these strangers in peer interaction at their first contact that mattered and made impact. To this end, the researcher completed a detailed observation journal on the first class, with a total of twenty pairs. Learners were asked to practice the dialogue in the book with a partner and then read it out loud. The observed results were consistent to the later findings of this study. All the observed pairs in that first lesson showed a collaborative attitude. Requests such as “Do you want to go first...”, “Let’s say...”, and “We can...” were frequently heard. Also, there were smiling faces and laughter at times and learners began to chat with their partners over jobs, learning experience before long.

Working adult learners demonstrated an overall collaborative interactive pattern regardless of the length of acquaintance and gender. More importantly, the partner combination in terms of attitude could involve either two active peers or an active peer associated with a less active partner, without being necessarily dominant or passive.

2. Learners’ Perceptions of pair work

The percentage of agreement and disagreement of the statements on the questionnaire was shown in Table 3. The first two statements received total agreement among the fifty participants. General comments on pair work were “supportive”, “interactive” and “reciprocal”. All subjects perceived pair work as a positive way to assist their English learning, and 90% of them experienced the encouraging effect on the confidence to speak. Two of the four labelled “passive” participants (Gem, Joe, Chen and Katy) in this study were interviewed. Both Gem and

Joe attributed their passiveness in the paired task to their introvert personality. More importantly, they were pleased with their “improved interaction” and did not see themselves as totally passive partners. In addition, five participants replied that they were uncertain if they became more confident in speaking English, and failed to offer an explanation. Based on the researcher’s observation of and casual talks with these five subjects, they appeared to be less confident in their language learning and performance compared to their counterparts during the learning process.

Table 3

Findings from the questionnaire

| Item | Statement | Yes | No | Not sure | Percentage of “Yes” |
|------|---|-----|----|----------|---------------------|
| 1 | Exchange of ideas among peer assists learning | 50 | 0 | 0 | 100% |
| 2 | Pair work (dialogue) is beneficial to your English learning | 50 | 0 | 0 | 100% |
| 3 | Pair work (dialogue) enhances your speaking ability | 45 | 0 | 5 | 90% |
| 4 | You are an active learner | 35 | 0 | 0 | 70% |
| 5 | You are a passive learner | 15 | 0 | 0 | 30% |
| 6 | You have once worked with a dominant partner | 1 | 49 | 0 | 2% |
| 7 | You have once worked with a passive partner | 0 | 50 | 0 | 0% |

Regarding the experience towards their working peer, almost all participants reflected that they have neither worked with a dominant partner nor a passive one. One participant reported having once worked with a dominant peer but perceived his experience in a positive way, viewing his peer’s dominancy as merely a way of expression.

As mentioned earlier, twenty-five participants consented to an interview. Major findings were analyzed and summarized into three aspects: 1) all interviewees perceived pair work as a form of “discussion” and “idea-sharing”, 2) all interviewees perceived pair work to be beneficial to English learning, and 3) 19 interviewees suggested that partners’ attitude matters more than ability.

Discussion and Conclusion

In regard to the overall patterns of dyadic interaction among working adult EFL learners, results suggested that most of the observed instances showed a collaborative pattern, conforming to findings of previous research (e.g., Storch, 2002). Adult learners could be dominant figures easily involve in aggressive or argumentative interaction in their social lives, but they could also simply restrain their roles to a collaborative one in a learning context as observed. Reasons for the absence of the other three pair-work patterns suggested by Storch (2002) could be drawn on the distinct characteristics of working adult EFL learners: maturity and flexibility. All interviewees reflected similar opinion to the consensus of creating a collaborative atmosphere when assigned to work in pairs. Furthermore, instances of passive/passive pattern found in the present study seemed to result from personality differences rather than emotional problems as claimed in Matoba’s (2005) study. To note, such passive pattern changed as the participants get to know each other more through each interactive move (Joe and Gem’s example); and adult learners were able to turn a passive pattern into a less passive one (Chen and Katy’s example). Dyadic patterns were thus evidenced as dynamic, a contrary result to Storch’s (2002).

Another crucial finding is that when encountering a self-described or an observed passive peer, no participants comported and behaved themselves as either a dominator or an expert. An expert/novice interactive pattern among working adult EFL seemed to out of question. The active unconsciously maintained a collaborative condition by making requests and inviting ideas. The passive peer, on the other hand, remained quiet most of the time yet was prone to cooperation with the aim to finish the required task. Thus, it was significant to infer that a passive learner did in fact involve, if not a lot, and could partly contribute, developing a pattern that comprised of an active and passive (less active) learner instead of a dominant and passive one, which, again, was distinctive to the previous findings. The researcher thereby proposed three peer interaction patterns of adult EFL learners illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4

A comparison of peer interaction pattern in Storch ‘s (2002) research and the current study

| Storch’s (2002) peer interaction patterns | Proposed peer interaction patterns |
|---|------------------------------------|
|---|------------------------------------|

| | |
|---|---|
| Collaborative (willingness to offer and engage with each other's ideas, discussion, mutual solution) | Collaborative (abundant of idea exchanging, IRF, negotiation, appreciation, mutual solution) |
| Dominant / dominant (high level of disagreements; reaching no consensus) | Passive / passive (long period of silence, limited opinion exchange and discussion, mutual solution) |
| Dominant / passive (authoritarian vs subservient role; little or no negotiation) | Active / passive (less active) (encourage the less active to get involved, invite ideas, little discussion, mutual solution) |
| Expert / novice (The more capable peer encourages the less capable partner, little negotiation) | |

In regard to the learners' perception of pair work, in contrast with the negative feedbacks and perceptions presented in earlier studies (e.g., Hyde, 1993; Le, 2003; Watanabe, 2008; Zhang, 1995), it was of particular importance that adult EFL learners in this study regarded pair work as discussion, laying the fundamental ideology and cooperative attitude when working in pairs. This supported the majority of collaborative patterns observed in all dyads, and sustained the significance of targeting working adult learners and the study per se.

To conclude, possessed with distinctive features including maturity and flexibility, working adult EFL learners spontaneously cooperated and engaged in pair-work tasks which resulted in an overall positive comment and across-the-board collaborative pattern, enhancing the interactive and scaffolding nature of paired activity—the two major rewarding elements, in L2 learning.

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