

INFORMAL LANGUAGE LEARNING SETTING: TECHNOLOGY OR SOCIAL INTERACTION?

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ABSTRACT

Based on the informal language learning theory, language learning can occur outside the classroom setting unconsciously and incidentally through interaction with the native speakers or exposure to authentic language input through technology. However, an EFL context lacks the social interaction which naturally occurs in an ESL context. To explore which source of language input would have a greater impact, this study investigated the effect of exposure on speaking proficiency. Two types of exposure were provided: audiovisual mass media as a source of language input in an EFL context and social interaction as a source of language input in an ESL context. A sample speaking test was administered to one hundred language learners in an EFL context (Iran) and another one hundred language learners in an ESL context (Malaysia). Then, thirty participants from each context who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as homogenous language learners. During the experiment, EFL participants had exposure to audiovisual mass media while the ESL participants were exposed to social interaction as a source of language input. At the end, both groups took another sample speaking test. The post-test showed that the EFL group performed better which was indicative of the fact that exposure to technology promotes speaking proficiency.

Keywords: exposure, mass media, social context, speaking proficiency, EFL context, ESL context

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, technology has dominated the world by sharing and showing a variety of programs to both instruct and entertain the audience. The impressive developments in audio, video, and computer-mediated communications programs offer many possibilities for teachers to construct activities around listening to TV and radio news programs, watching related videos, and holding conversations in real-time (Chinnery, 2005; Jingi & Ying, 1999; Parker, 2000; Salaberry, 2001; Bell, 2003; Ishihara & Chi, 2004; Bedjou, 2006). Moreover, technology has become the track upon which the express train of education is heading toward its destination. In fact, the growth of its application in the field of education and its rapid development in transforming the process of learning is unbelievable (Mayya, 2007). Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), computer and video equipped classrooms, the internet, e-mail, 'chat', and Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) are just few examples of the application of technology to the endeavor of language teaching in formal language settings as well as informal language settings.

Informal language learning was first introduced and popularized by Knowles (1950). Rogers (2004) suggests that informal language learning is unstructured, unpurposeful but is the most extensive and most important part of all the learning that all of us do every day of our lives. On the contrary, formal language learning is structured, purposeful, and school based. Other researchers (Lightbown & Spada, 2001; Marsick & Watkins, 1990) have also described formal and informal language learning in the same way.

Whether language acquisition is to take place in formal or informal language learning settings in English as a second language context (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) context, language learners need to have exposure and access to a sort of language input. In fact, language acquisition simply cannot take place in a vacuum without considering having exposure to some sort of language input (Gass, 1997). Needless to say, the source of language input for acquiring the language particularly in informal setting in both EFL and ESL contexts should not be neglected.

English is dominantly spoken or is the official language in an ESL context where language learners can make use of social interaction as a source of language input to acquire the language in an informal setting (Rogers, 2004). In other words, learners can have interaction with other people from different countries using English language as the medium of communication. Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis emphasizes that conversational interaction enhances SLA. Particularly, negotiation of meaning as a component of interaction

which triggers interactional adjustments by the native speakers or more proficient interlocutor can contribute to SLA.

In contrast, social interaction in English is very limited or does not exist as a source of language input for acquiring the language in an informal setting in an EFL context. English is considered as a foreign language rather than a second language in this context. As a result, English is not used as a medium of communication or for other purposes in society. Indeed, English is only used by language learners in formal language setting at universities or language institutes.

Nevertheless, different audiovisual mass media technologies are available in EFL contexts that make access to language input in formal as well as informal language learning settings readily available. Between audiovisual mass media technologies and social interaction, which source of language input would have a greater impact on speaking proficiency is the point for exploration.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The term “informal language learning” compared to formal language learning was first introduced and popularized by Knowles in his pioneer work *Informal Adult Education* (1950). Later Coombs and Ahmed (1974) defined informal learning as the lifelong process by which every individual acquires and gathers knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from exposure to the environment at home or at work through reading newspapers and books or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television. Based on Coombs and Ahmed’s definition, informal education is unorganized, unsystematic and even unintentional at times.

The distinction between formal and informal learning settings is significant also in debates about second language development. Lightbown and Spada (2001) describe informal setting as the contexts in which the adult learner is exposed to the target language at home or at work or in social interaction, and formal settings as the contexts where the target language is being taught to a group of second or foreign language learners. In the formal language learning setting, the focus of learning is on the language itself. On the contrary, in informal language learning setting the focus is on meaning. In informal language learning setting language learners interact with native speakers in the target language country, use different technologies at home or at work, watch a movie, or listen to music or song just as an entertainment which can lead to language learning Lightbown and Spada (2001). In other words, by viewing a movie or listening to a song in informal settings, language learners indirectly get involved in the language learning process when they try to understand the movie or the song by using a dictionary or subtitle (Pemberton, Fallahkhair & Mosthoff, 2004). According to Marsick and Watkins (1990), formal learning is classroom-based, and highly structured and purposeful.

A lot of research related to the present study consider the use of technology and interaction in ESL context to enhance language learning (Adams, Morrison, & Reedy, 1968; Decker, 1976; Keller, 1987; Clark & Sugrue, 1991; Phillips, 1998; Hubbard, 1998; Clifford, 1998; Egan, 1999; Pemberton *et al*, 2004). Most of them reflect the behaviorist and interactionist view of language learning. The behaviorists consider learning the language through stimulus and response with the help of technology and the interactionists consider interaction with the native speakers in the target language country or ESL context to enhance language learning. Moreover, the existing research on the use of technology in informal language learning setting and language acquisition reflect an interest in the use of multimedia environments and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) both in-and-outside the classroom.

CALL is significant (Decker, 1976) because it provides instant feedback correcting drill exercises and tests. This type of exercises and tests in the use of technology generally reflects the behaviorists view of language learning. Rogers (2004) notes that the behaviorists have worked well in explicit teaching and computer-assisted instruction (e.g. learning through repetitions, drills and practice) but they would not be suitable for learning informally from exposure to audiovisual mass media.

Pemberton *et al* (2004) highlight that in an informal language learning setting, the participants are not involved in such repetitions and drills which are similar to activities of the classroom settings. In the same line, Rogers (2004) emphasizes that if different technological tools are to be used in informal setting for language learning, it should be unstructured, unconscious or unpurposeful.

Regarding the application of the behaviorist theory of language learning in relation to the use of technology in informal language learning environment, Rogers (2004) notes that the behaviorists have worked well in explicit teaching and computer-assisted instruction (e.g. learning through repetitions, drills and practice) but they would not be suitable for learning informally from exposure to audio/visual mass media. In other words, based on the

behaviorist approach, language learners are required to do some exercises and drills and follow some pre-designed activities even in informal settings.

In recent years, the use of "non-desktop" technologies such as audiovisual mass media, for example, TV is also attracting increasing interest amongst researchers in informal, adult and lifelong learning and second language acquisition (Milton, 2002; Evans, 2006; Mackenzie, 1997; Pemberton *et al.*, 2004; Poon, 1992; Becker, 1996). According to Milton (2002), mass media technologies can give the teachers as well as the learners a wide variety of activities and experiences that can support language learning in informal settings as well as the formal settings of the school.

Exposure to mass media news, for example, TV and radio news, the pedagogical value of such materials, and the possibility of using TV and radio news at all levels of EFL/ESL settings in order to enhance different language skills have been the focus of many studies (Brinton & Gaskill, 1978; Poon, 1992; Baker, 1996; Cauldwell, 1996; Mackenzie, 1997; Berber, 1997; Beach & Somerholter, 1997; Cabaj & Nicolic, 2000; Bell, 2003; to name only a few).

However, very few or none at all attempts to investigate from the perspective of a comparison between social interaction as a source of language input in an ESL context and audiovisual mass media as a source of language input in an EFL context; which has a greater impact. Consequently, the present research aimed to compare the effect of exposure to two types of sources of language input to enhance language learning: audiovisual mass media as a type of language input in an EFL context compared to the social interaction as a type of language input in the ESL context.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

One of the problems that EFL learners confront in the EFL context such as Iran is how to improve their language proficiency. Limited access to a real context has forced teachers in Iran to rely on textbooks and other classroom materials in teaching the language. Consequently, for EFL learners to acquire a satisfying speaking proficiency, they themselves have to make great effort especially outside of the classroom. The instructors too have to help and guide the learners to choose authentic and appropriate materials. Technology is the only means to update oneself compared to traditional ways such as books. For the ESL context, the environment around is the source of language input. Learners get to communicate in the target outside of the classroom. Which source has a greater impact on the speaking proficiency of the learners? This research intended to investigate this.

RESEARCH QUESTION

More particularly, the present research was set to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent does social interaction improve language learners' language proficiency in ESL context?
2. To what extent does exposure to various programs from audiovisual mass media technologies improve language learners' language proficiency in EFL context?

METHOD

Participants

The participants of this study were initially one hundred language learners including both males and females from Iran as an EFL context and one hundred language learners including both males and females from Malaysia as an ESL context. Out of the initial participant from each context 30 participants were selected as intermediate language learners based on a speaking proficiency pre-test.

Instruments

Three instruments were utilized to carry out the present research. The first instrument consists of two sample IELTS speaking proficiency tests which were used as a pre-test and post-test. Prior to the study, the two sample IELTS language proficiency tests were verified to be parallel and reliable to increase the internal validity of the data.

Various speaking tests are available (Hughes, 2003; Farhady, et al., 2001; IELTS Center (2000); Heaton, 1990 and Underhill, 1987). However, a more updated checklist developed by Askari (2006) adapted from various checklists, was selected as the second instrument because it was deemed the most appropriate given the various components of the speaking proficiency: fluency, accuracy, comprehension, communication, vocabulary and accent (see appendix). The checklist scores each speaking test out of 30. Moreover, each component incorporates five points. The validity of the checklist was verified by Askari based on a pilot study.

The third instrument was a self report sheet which was used to collect data about the participants' amount of exposure to social interaction or various audiovisual mass media programs such as news, movies, cartoons, and so on from different technologies outside of the classroom contexts.

Procedure

This research was conducted based on a pre-test and post-test design. The procedure underlying the present research consists of three stages. The first stage concerns the verification of the instruments. The second stage is related to the selection of the participants. Finally, the last stage is concerned with the exposure period which lasted for two months.

Before the participants were selected, the reliability of the sample speaking proficiency pre-post tests was verified. To do so, the tests were given to a group of language learners in both contexts separately. Then, the reliabilities of both tests were calculated separately by means of KR-21 formula. The reliability of one test was 0.78 and the other one was 0.82 which indicated that the two sample speaking tests were verified in terms of reliability.

Then, the tests were given to one hundred EFL students including both males and females in Iran and one hundred ESL learners in Malaysia. When the scores of the tests were obtained, 30 randomly selected participants who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as homogeneous language learners from each context. In relation to scoring procedure, it should be mentioned that each speaking test was scored out of 30 based on the checklist. In order to increase the reliability of the speaking scores, rating activities were carried out first by the researcher himself and then by an inter-rater and later the mean score of speaking the pre-post tests for every participant was calculated.

Throughout the experiment, the participants in group one (ESL context) were asked to keep a diary of the amount of exposure to social interaction in English outside of the classroom. Moreover, they were asked to keep note of the possible problems related to their experience of having social interaction in English. In contrast, the participants in group two (EFL context) who did not have the chance to have social interaction in English were asked to have exposure to their preferred type of programs from various audiovisual mass media technologies and keep a diary of their daily amount of such exposure. Similar to ESL participants, EFL participants were also asked to report on the problems related to their having exposure to various audiovisual mass media programs from different technologies.

At the end of group one (ESL context) participants' exposure to social interaction and group two (EFL context) to various audiovisual mass media programs from a range of audiovisual mass media technologies, all the participants took the second parallel speaking proficiency test as a post-test to observe if there was any improvement in their speaking proficiency and the extent of the improvement.

The results of the post-test showed a significant difference between EFL and ESL participants' performance. EFL participants outperformed the participants in ESL context. This seems to indicate a greater positive impact from exposure to audiovisual mass media technology than social interaction on speaking proficiency development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research question one

In relation to scores obtained from the pre-post tests by the participants in the first group (ESL context), there was a minor increase in the mean score in the post-test. However, in order to investigate the significance of this improvement, a statistical analysis of t-test was conducted. The result of the t-test showed that the t-observed was smaller than the t-critical which was indicative of the fact that the increase in the mean score was not significant to contribute to speaking proficiency development. In other words, the ESL participants could improve their speaking proficiency through exposure to social interaction in an informal setting but the results did not translate into a significant improvement.

The following table (1) shows the statistical analysis of the data obtained from the administration of the pre-post tests to group one (ESL context).

According to the data obtained from the diaries of this first group, each participant had social interaction in English for the average amount of 132 minutes a day (more than those in the second group). Regardless of the bigger amount of exposure, group one participants failed to improve their speaking proficiency through exposure to social interaction.

Plausible reasons that group one participants could not improve their speaking proficiency to a significant extent are the quality of the language input received and modified comprehensible input. In an ESL context such as Malaysia, the social interaction outside the school is provided by common people who speak English but are mostly non-native speakers of the language, not ESL teachers. The quality of the language input is in doubt.

Secondly, in maintaining the flow of the interaction, the interactants could simplify the input for comprehensibility purpose thus compromising on language learning purpose. The less than proficient speakers probably modified their input for the sake of comprehension and communication. The type of language input which is embedded in the interactionally modified input tends to be either at the language learners' current language proficiency level or even lower than that.

In short, in an ESL context, the aim to communicate and comprehend the message meaning may at times seem counter-productive to second language learning purpose and result in less than desirable language input for the language learner outside of the classroom.

Research question two

Regarding the scores obtained from the pre-post tests by the participants in the second group (EFL context), the change in the mean score in the post-test was greater than that of the first group (ESL context). Subsequently, a statistical analysis of t-test was also conducted in order to observe the significance of this increase. The result of the t-test showed that the t-observed was greater than the t-critical which was indicative of the fact that the increase in the mean score was significant enough to contribute to language proficiency enhancement. As a result, low level language learners could improve their language proficiency to a significant extent through exposure to various audiovisual mass media sources. Following is the statistical analysis of the data obtained from the administration of the pre-post tests to group two (table 2).

The data obtained from the second group participants' diaries showed that each participant had the minimum daily amount of 71 minutes exposure to various programs from different audiovisual mass media technologies in informal setting. This amount is less than the first group's.

The results obtained from the analysis of the pre-post tests scores of group two participants are in line with the studies conducted on effectiveness of exposure to various audiovisual mass media technologies that can provide the necessary language input for language learning (Brinton & Gaskill, 1978; Milton 2002; Evans 2006; Mackenzie 1997; Pemberton et al. 2004; Becker 1996; Cauldwell 1996).

It comparing the scores obtained and the input from the self report diaries, it can be concluded that the quality of the input that language learners receive is much more important than its quantity. Although social interaction can be used as a source of language input for second language acquisition, the results of the present study reveal that the amount of quality language input that language learners may receive in a social interaction context is very limited. Although there is negotiation of message meaning which according to the interactionist hypothesis aids second language acquisition, in some cases, the negotiation provides limited amount of quality input for language acquisition.

In contrast to the ESL context, the participants in the EFL context reported the use of dictionary and/or subtitles in order to comprehend the language input offered through the audiovisual mass media technology. The language input through this source could not be modified but somehow offered a rich data for language development, in this case, speaking proficiency.

CONCLUSION

Language learners in EFL/ESL contexts can make use of various sources of language input for language enhancement in informal setting. For example, language learners in ESL context can have exposure to social interaction in English in informal setting which has the potential to boost language learning. However, although social interaction in English does not exist in EFL context, language learners in EFL context can have access to various sources of language input through different audiovisual mass media technologies. In the same line, the present study aimed at filling the gap in the experimental work on finding an authentic source of language input that can best contribute to developing speaking proficiency in an EFL context which lacks the social context similar to that of the ESL one. Consequently, the effect of exposure to audiovisual mass media in EFL context, on one hand, and social interaction in ESL context, on the other hand, on speaking proficiency was studied.

The results of the study were indicative of the fact that exposure to authentic language input from various audiovisual mass media technologies in informal setting can contribute more to language development than

exposure to social interaction in English. The results showed that language learners can improve their speaking proficiency to a significant extent through exposure to audiovisual mass media technologies in informal setting. In contrast, for the sake of comprehension and communication, social interaction in English may hinder the development of language learners. Accordingly, for the language practitioners in EFL/ESL contexts, recognizing the limitations in the environment to provide language interaction in a social situation, the findings of this study serve as an important reminder of the possibility of incorporating authentic input from the various audiovisual technologies such as TV in the lesson planning.

Finally, the point should be highlighted that the present study was conducted with intermediate language learners. Different results may be obtained if the study is conducted with other language proficiency levels such as advance level. Moreover, considering the fact that all ESL contexts are not the same in terms of the quality of the language input which is embedded in social interactions in English, different results may also be obtained if the study is conducted in another ESL context.

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Appendix 1

The Sample Checklist for Measuring Communicative Abilities:

Scale I- Fluency:

- 5- Speaks fluently.
- 4- Speaks with near-native like fluency, pauses and hesitations do not interfere with comprehension
- 3- Speaks with occasional hesitations.
- 2- Speaks hesitantly and slowly because of rephrasing and searching for words.
- 1- Speaks in single word and short patterns, unable to make connected sentences.

Scale II- Comprehension:

- 5- Understands academic discourse without difficulty.
- 4- Understands most spoken language except for very colloquial speech.
- 3- Understands academic discourse with repetitions, rephrasing, and clarification.
- 2- Understands simple sentences, words; requires repetitions, slower than normal speech.
- 1- Understands very little or no English.

Scale III- Communication:

- 5- Communicates competently in social academic settings.
- 4- Speaks fluently in a social academic settings, errors do not interfere with meaning.
- 3- Initiates and sustains conversation, exhibits self confidence in social situations.
- 2- Begins to communicate for personal and survival needs.
- 1- Almost unable to communicate.

Scale IV- Vocabulary:

- 5- Uses extensive vocabulary in any domain appropriately.
- 4- Uses varied vocabulary to discuss general topics and in special interests.
- 3- Uses academic vocabulary, some word usage inappropriate, slightly damages the message.
- 2- Uses limited vocabulary, constant use of one word.
- 1- Inadequate basic vocabulary.

Scale V- Structure:

- 5- Masters a variety of grammatical structures, almost no error.
- 4- Occasional grammatical errors but no problem with understanding.
- 3- Uses some complex sentences but lacks control over irregular forms.
- 2- Uses predominantly present tense verbs, constant errors interfere with understanding.
- 1- Severe errors make understanding completely impossible.

Scale VI- Accent:

- 5- Acceptable pronunciation, with few traces of foreign accent.
- 4- Speaks with few phonemic errors, but almost intelligible pronunciation.
- 3- Occasional errors necessitate attentive listening.
- 2- Constant phonemic errors make understanding extremely hard.
- 1- Severe problems make understanding almost impossible.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics related to ESL participant's speaking proficiency pre-post tests results

<i>ESL</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>MEAN</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t-test</i>
<i>Pretest</i>	30	1.96	.58	<u>0.235</u>
<i>Posttest</i>	30	2.00	.41	

T-observed=-0.235 T-critical=1.671 T-observed smaller than t-critical

Table 2. Descriptive statistics related to EFL participants' speaking proficiency pre-post tests results

<i>EFL</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>MEAN</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t-test</i>
<i>pretest</i>	30	2.13	.50	<u>4.253</u>
<i>posttest</i>	30	2.61	.46	

T-observed=-4.253 T-critical=1.671 T-observed bigger than t-critical