Effects of Proficiency Differences and Patterns of Paired Interaction: In-class Pair Work between Chinese Heritage Learners and Foreign Language Learners
华裔和非华裔学习者课堂小组活动中的水平差异和互动模式效应
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Abstract

This research explores the nature of dyadic interactions between Chinese heritage learners (CHLs) and Chinese foreign language learners (CFLs) in a classroom setting and investigates how learners’ proficiency differences change the dynamics of paired interaction.

As CHLs have acquired with some degree of oral proficiency but low (or non-existent) literacy, their learning needs are different from those of CFLs, who have learned Chinese only in the classroom setting. Although researchers have advocated for a separate curriculum for CHLs, creating a heritage track may not be an option for many Chinese programs due to insufficient enrollment and limited resources. Huge proficiency variations among CHLs also make it difficult to provide a language curriculum that fits the needs of all learners. Therefore, CHLs are assigned to classes with CFLs in most Chinese language programs. From a pedagogical point of view, uneven proficiency levels are a great concern for instructors who teach a language class with students of different language backgrounds and with varying abilities, especially when assigning students to work in pairs or small groups.

Building on the claims of sociocultural theory, it has been argued that paired interaction benefits language learning. However, many studies indicate that not all pair work facilitates language learning. The degree of control over the task, the level of engagement with a counterpart’s contribution, and the interlocutors’ oral proficiency directly influence the dynamics of any paired interaction. Although CHL-CFL paired interaction has become a common phenomenon in Chinese language classes, it has not been fully explored.

In this study, data were collected over ten weeks in three intermediate-level Chinese classes. Participants first filled out a language background survey to lead to a better understanding of the environments in which they use Chinese. Next, they took two proficiency tests to assess their comprehensive Chinese skills. Over the course of the fall 2011 semester, ten CHL-CFL pairs engage in heritage/non-heritage paired discussions on six different occasions. After data from the six paired interactions were collected, participants took a post-study survey, which provides their perceptions about paired discussion and their roles in paired interaction over the ten weeks.

According to the preliminary findings of this study, CHLs’ language background and amount of Chinese language exposure determine the CHL-CFL proficiency gap in each pair, and further influence the pattern of paired interaction. It has been discovered that Mandarin CHLs
generally demonstrate higher oral proficiency and better sense of grammar than Dialect CHLs. However, there exist huge variations within both Mandarin CHL group and Dialect CHL group. For that reason, learners’ proficiency levels served as important indicators of interaction patterns. Tutoring pattern, Dominant-Passive pattern, and Collaborative pattern have been identified in these ten pairs. In Tutoring pattern or Dominant-Passive pattern, in which CHL-CFL proficiency gaps were large, CHLs either played a role of vocabulary tutor or directly controlled the paired discussions. When the proficiency gaps became smaller, CHLs lost their dominance and needed their partners’ help to complete the task.

Changes in paired interactions have also been discovered over the ten weeks of the data collection period. As CFLs become more proficient in Chinese, a trajectory from tutoring/dominant interactions to more collaborative discussions were shown in some CHL-CFL pairs. This study will contribute to the field of SLA by investigating the interactional dynamics and using the findings to improve future Chinese curricular design.