

Applying Second Language Acquisition Research to English Language Teaching in Taiwan

Yi-chun Pan

National Pingtung Institute of Commerce
Pan_yichun@yahoo.com

Abstract: *This paper explores three areas of second language acquisition research: data analysis, instructional effect, and linguistic input. Data analysis discusses contrastive analysis and error analysis. The good and bad points of both are reviewed. The sections on instructional effect investigate whether or not teaching has a positive influence on students' second language performance. Regarding linguistic input, the focus is on interlanguage talk (so-called "learner talk"). The main consideration is to what extent interaction amongst students contributes to their second language development. This paper suggests pedagogical implications derived from the research studies on data analysis, instructional effect, and linguistic input, in the hope of providing valuable insights that will benefit second language educators.*

Keywords: Errors, Instruction, Interlanguage.

1. INTRODUCTION

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research is the study of how people learn a language other than their mother tongue. The goals of SLA research are to describe how second language (SL) acquisition proceeds and to identify factors that account for the reasons why learners acquire an SL in the way they do. An overall comprehension of SLA research will facilitate educators' development of appropriate syllabi and methodologies in language classrooms.

As SLA is a broad field, the researcher predominantly focuses on three areas, data analysis, instructional effects, and linguistic input. A survey of the historical development of types of data analysis on students' language samples will offer teachers a better understanding of the second language acquisition process, students' strengths and weaknesses, and finally provide facilitative feedback or remedies. Contrastive analysis and error analysis are the main types of data analysis that this paper will explore. An error-analysis approach to grammar teaching is discussed as an implication derived from the research.

SL teachers aim at facilitating their students' learning; therefore, their major concern is whether formal instruction has a facilitating effect on SL development. While a few investigations show little results from classroom teaching, a number of SLA research findings demonstrate that instructed learners perform better than naturalistic acquirers in certain aspects. Since formal instruction plays a significant role in SL performance, what type of teaching methods work best for students? Although there is no "best" teaching method, task-based language teaching, both form- and meaning-focused, is introduced in the hope of boosting students' communicative competence.

With linguistic input, interlanguage talk (i.e. conversations between non-native speakers in classrooms) will be explored in terms of its capacity for improving students' language performance. Interlanguage talk must be the focus of investigation because English is a foreign language in Taiwan. The implication is that the linguistic environment develops as a result of the interaction between peers in addition to teachers' instructional input. Since interlanguage talk is a source of students' input, many teachers question its effectiveness. This paper provides a starting

point for answering teachers' questions. In addition, the group work from which most interlanguage talk derives will be investigated to assess its appropriateness in classrooms.

The intent of SLA research is to offer language teachers insights and reflections that will maximize the effects of their instruction, and, in turn, facilitate the development of language learners' proficiency. It is sincerely hoped that this paper, which reviews the essence of SLA studies, will generate beneficial discourse regarding English teaching in Taiwan.

2. TYPES OF DATA ANALYSIS

The main way of investigating second language acquisition is by collecting and describing samples of learner language. This section reviews two major types of data analysis, i.e. contrastive analysis (CA), and error analysis (EA). In addition, the pedagogical implications drawn from each type of analysis will be suggested.

2.1 Contrastive Analysis

Until the late sixties, the behaviouristic view of language learning prevailed. In the behaviourist perspective, learning meant acquiring a set of new language habits. Errors were thus considered the result of persistent intrusion of mother tongue habits in the acquisition of the new language (Skinner, 1957). Lado (1957) further explained that errors were primarily caused by mother tongue interference, the so-called negative transfer. According to Lado's contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH), linguistic differences between the native and the target language were the sources of learning difficulty. By systematically comparing two languages, we could anticipate trouble spots in the acquisition of the target language and errors might then be prevented or at least held to a minimum.

The association of CAH with behaviourism inspired many researchers to conduct contrastive analyses (CAs), since the most efficient language materials, they believed, were based on a scientific comparison of the native and the target language (see, for example, Buteau, 1970). Through CA, errors could be predicted, which was a guide for teachers to detect the basis for learning difficulty and so supplement standard instruction with additional drills and exercises.

While CA predicted some errors (for instance, phonological errors), not all of its predictions were supported by research findings. The CAH assumed similarities between two languages would facilitate learning whereas differences would interfere with learning. However, often it is the similarities, not the differences, that cause the greatest problems (Koutsoudas and Koutsoudas 1962). Dulay and Burt (1975) also claimed that only 4 percent of the total number of errors committed by their subjects was due to mother tongue interference.

2.1.1 Pedagogical Implications from Contrastive Analysis

Although CA has been criticized for both over-prediction and under-prediction, CA as a teaching technique has its pedagogical significance in grammar instruction. Most of the scholars in the fields of language learning and teaching assert that, when confronted with difficult grammatical forms, learners often conduct an L1-L2 comparison. Since this comparison is implicit, it may result in the formation of incorrect rules due to incomplete knowledge (Selinker, 1992; Robinson, 1995). The time and the place of the enhancement of the inputs are of crucial importance. Hence, it is advisable to make such interlingual comparisons quite explicit on the part of the learners (Smith, 1993). The contrastive instruction approach is believed to facilitate the learning of difficult grammatical forms in the target language.

Instead of using CA to predict difficulty or explain errors, teachers could use it to compile instructional materials that address the contrastive differences of the two languages, and then employ the contrast-oriented instruction to first raise learners' consciousness about the difficult grammatical forms and then learn them.

2.2 Error Analysis

Due to the fact that CA failed to make accurate predictions as to what areas would cause learning difficulty, error analysis (EA) emerged. On the contrary to the CA, which considered language transfer to be the basic process of second language learning, EA demonstrated that learner errors

were not only because of the learner's native language but also they reflected some universal learning strategies (Richards, 1971).

From the viewpoint of EA, learners play an active role in acquiring a language. They process inputs, generate hypotheses, test them and refine them. Therefore, Corder (1967) claimed that if the errors of language learners were analyzed carefully, the process of language acquisition would be understood. EA would allow teachers to figure out what areas should be focused on and what kind of attention is needed. So the language teachers can be better able to develop curriculum and select materials that can facilitate L2 learning processes.

Richards (1971) categorized errors into interlingual and intralingual. Interlingual errors were those caused by the mother tongue interference. On the other hand, a lot of similar errors, committed by learners regardless of their nationality, were termed intralingual. For instance, both L1 and L2 learners sometimes create a sentence like 'I don't know where is he.' This error is not due to the language transfer, but due to the learners' failure to observe the boundaries of a rule. This type of error is classified as overgeneralization (Richards, 1971). However, the arbitrary distinction between interlingual or intralingual errors is not easy.

Though it has some contributions to the fields of linguistics and education, error analysis is often subject to criticism. Because EA investigates the errors learners commit and ignores the things learners do correctly, an overview of the proficiency of learners cannot be obtained. In addition, it is often difficult to identify the unitary source of an error (Schachter & Celce-Murcia, 1977). For instance, the source of an error like 'the doges ran home.' is ambiguous. The error could result from the overgeneralization of the syllabic plural, but it is also possible that the error is developmental in nature; children learning English as native speakers also commonly commit this particular error. An absence of errors does not imply that learners are not experiencing difficulty, since learners sometimes use avoidance. For example, Schachter (1974) discovered that Chinese and Japanese speakers committed fewer errors in the production of English relative clauses than Spanish and Persian speakers, a result that was contrary to expectations based on a priori CA. The reason for the lower number of errors was the fact that Chinese and Japanese speakers produced fewer relative clauses. In other words, the Chinese and Japanese students knew they would have trouble with relative clauses, so they avoided producing them and made fewer errors accordingly.

2.2.1 Pedagogical Implications from Error Analysis

While EA has its shortcomings as discussed in the preceding section, the findings of error analysis can benefit teachers in many ways. From the errors, the teacher can ascertain the learners' progress towards the goal and how much further they have to go. By tracking the students' progress, the teacher will be able to continue his instruction according to what students must learn and which sections of the teaching strategy to change or rearrange. Errors offer the teacher valuable feedback in terms of demonstrating how effective the teacher's instructional style is and changes should be instituted to elicit better performance from the students. In addition, errors pinpoint the areas that require more attention from the teacher. Also, when their sources are correctly identified, errors reveal the areas that require improvement and how to address those areas.

2.2.2 An Error-Analysis Approach to Teaching Grammar

Analysis of student errors provides data that can be applied to both the learning process and the development of teaching materials. By supplementing the standard classroom process with additional support based on error data, teachers can assist students to acquire the necessary skills they might otherwise be unable to obtain.

In an error-analysis approach, teachers first systematically analyze the errors that occur in students' spoken utterances and/or written assignments, and then teach grammar both implicitly and explicitly. The following sections will elaborate on each stage of this process.

(i). Analysis of Students' Errors.

The results of error analysis can be used as an indicator of learning achievement and guidance for teaching (Dulay & Burt, 1975). Despite the necessary time and effort required for analysis, it is as indispensable to the educational process as is a physician's analysis of test results to enable determination of a correct diagnosis and subsequent treatment.

When doing error analysis, teachers first collect both students' oral and written work. The second step is the identification of errors and their types, for instance, omission of the plural -s suffix, addition of the article "the" to a city name, and the like. After this, teachers make a list of errors in the order of their degree of affecting comprehensibility. For instance, in English, students quite often omit the third-person -s suffix in the present simple, and also commonly misuse a present verb form when they mean the past. Generally speaking, the second error is more likely to lead to misunderstanding than the first and therefore is more important to correct. Ur (1996) suggests that teachers should always focus on 'important' errors, i.e. errors that hinder intelligibility. Working, then, from a list of students' grammatical errors, teachers use their expertise to develop alternative ways to state the rules clearly and simply, and at the same time design drills, exercises, and tasks to help students with problems in grammar.

(ii). Explicit and Implicit Grammar Needs.

Teachers generally agree that students' language development will be severely constrained without a good knowledge of grammar. The significant questions, then, are: What essential grammar rules do students need and how do teachers instruct them effectively?

Grammar rules are numerous and some are complicated. Should teachers teach the whole grammatical system? Ur (1996) recommends that teachers concentrate on student's problematic areas after they have been diagnosed through error analyses. Furthermore, Swain (2002) suggests that teachers determine the basic grammar necessities based on students' needs rather than cover too many points of grammar all at once. For example, basic verb forms, interrogative and negative structures and the use of the main tenses will suffice to low-level students.

In terms of instruction method, grammar should be taught both deductively and inductively in order to accommodate different learning styles. Deductive teaching means to explain rules directly and give drills for practice. This kind of instruction is facilitative for adult learners who are good at analytical learning. On the other hand, inductive teaching involves explaining the structures in contextualized examples and then formulating the rules. This is most appropriate for younger learners because they are not yet accustomed to understanding or applying rules. Additionally, teaching grammar inductively can facilitate the acquisition of the grammatical knowledge needed for communication (Ellis, 2003).

To be considered a competent user of a language, one needs to know not only the rules of grammar, but also how the rules are applied in real communication. However, something that repeatedly happens is that some students who get a perfect score on grammar tests, later commit errors in the same structures when they are chatting with or writing emails to their friends. The problem in such a case is that the students have not completely mastered the structures; in fact, they still rely on a measure of conscious monitoring in order to produce them correctly. The teachers' job is to provide a bridge to help their students leap from form-focused accuracy work to fluent and acceptable, production. The bridge refers to a variety of practice activities that familiarize students with the structures in context, giving practice both in form and communicative meaning.

Dekeyser (1998) demonstrates a three-stage grammar instruction method that can get the students to learn the structures so thoroughly that they will be able to produce them correctly in a communicative context. First, explicitly provide knowledge about rules. Second, strengthen this knowledge through drills and exercises. Third, master such knowledge with fluency via meaningful tasks. To be more specific, ideal grammar teaching begins with establishing the structure of English, moves further to foster accuracy, and finally progresses to the development of fluency (Skehan, 1996). An integration of explicit and implicit instructions is optimal to teaching grammar.

3. THE EFFECT OF INSTRUCTION ON SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

EFL teachers are concerned if their instruction can facilitate the learning of their students. This issue is also a major concern of many SLA researchers. While a number of early SLA researchers contended that formal instruction exerted little to no influence on the development of IL, later studies revealed the potential of instruction to make highly positive contributions. The following sections will first offer a review of existing literature on the effects of instruction on the rate of acquisition and the ultimate level of attainment. Then an alternative form of classroom instruction will be discussed, i.e. task-based language teaching, which will be educationally beneficial and will result in the teachers' most productive effect.

3.1 Literature Review of Effects of Instruction

Numerous early SLA researchers found in their studies that there was no significant difference between instructed and naturalistic SLA. For example, Krashen, Sferlazza, Feldman, & Fathman (1976) discovered a similar order of supplying certain accurate grammatical morphemes in obligatory contexts between instructed learners and naturalistic acquirers. Therefore, they went on to infer that teaching did not assist SL learning. However, these inferences about the limitations or inefficacy of instruction are questionable, since these studies have investigated not the effects of instruction, but the similarities in the interlanguages of classroom and naturalistic learners (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991).

To explore the effects of formal instruction on SL learning, other studies were accordingly conducted. For example, Pienemann (1984) looked into the extent to which two-week-teaching could help ten Italian children learn subject-verb inversion in German. It was found that some children progressed one level further, a process that normally takes several months in untutored development. However, some children did not make any progress during the instruction period.

Pienemann interpreted that students can only learn from instruction when they are ready for it. Instruction does not advance students to the next stage in a developmental sequence if they are not ready. Instruction does, however, speed the rate of progress through the sequence if the students are ready. Pienemann's findings are encouraging to teachers, as opposed to the previous findings that minimize teachers' role in promoting students' learning. As long as teachers can provide students with material that is compatible with their current processing level, the effect of their instruction will be maximized.

In addition to the beneficial instructional effect on the rate of acquisition demonstrated in Pienemann's investigation, the results of Pica's (1983) research are also encouraging to teachers. In her work, Pica categorized students into three acquisition contexts: naturalistic, instructed, and mixed (a combination of classroom instruction and natural exposure in the target-language environment). She noted that the instruction-only group scored much higher on plural-s than the naturalistic group, who tended to omit target-like noun endings and to use a free form quantifier instead (e.g. two book, many town), a production strategy observed in many of the world's pidgins and creoles. On the other hand, at lower proficiency levels, mixed learners performed in similar ways to naturalistic learners, but became more like instructed learners at higher levels of proficiency. The implication of Pica's findings is that to some degree, instruction can prevent students from pidginization, a nuisance that teachers have tried every way possible to help students eliminate.

Further evidence to the facilitating effect of formal instruction may appear in the findings of studies reported by Zobl (1985). In his study, French-speaking university students in Canada were taught English possessive adjectives. Students who were instructed in both marked and unmarked data improved, far more than students who were instructed solely in unmarked data.

Moreover, Zobl observed that the groups receiving unmarked input tended to simplify grammar rules (e.g. overuse of the unmarked determiner his). Conversely, the groups receiving marked input produced rule complexification (e.g. overgeneralization of the marked her). Zobl went on to explain that when teachers instruct a difficult item, this will in turn trigger students to learn another correlated difficult item. The cumulative effect of learning difficult items is the

promotion of students' language proficiency to the next higher level. On the other hand, the simpler input to naturalistic learners might increase the length of time required to upgrade their language proficiency; even worse, they might fossilize before they advance to the next level.

Zobl's findings potentially explain that formal instruction has beneficial effects on learners' ultimate levels of attainment. It is possible that the majority of unmarked data that naturalistic acquirers encounter not only slows them down but also results in premature fossilization before they attain full target competence.

In closing, two conclusions can be drawn from research on the effect of instruction on SL development. First, formal instruction has positive effects on the rate of learners' language acquisition. Second, formal instruction has beneficial effects on learners' ultimate levels of attainment. It is obviously premature and almost certainly incorrect for some theorists and methodologists to claim that formal instruction in an SL is of minimal use.

3.2 Task-based language teaching (TBLT)

As elaborated in the preceding sections, formal instruction plays a significant role in facilitating SL learning. Although the researchers of those studies provided promising evidence of instruction's effects on SL development, even though they did not describe what comprised the instruction, it seems a consensus that any type of instruction that can foster language competence should be considered effective. Task-based language teaching, both form- and meaning-focused, is an alternative for teachers to use in classrooms to develop students' communicative competence, i.e. linguistic competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence.

3.2.1 Definition

What is task-based language teaching (TBLT)? Ellis (2003) defines TBLT as a type of language teaching in which students are required to complete a task. The task involves communicative language use in which the student's attention focuses on meaning rather than on grammatical form. This does not mean that grammar is not important. Instead, students express meaning through the deployment of grammatical knowledge. TBLT highlights the connection between meaning and form and asserts that the purpose of grammar is to allow the language user to express a variety of communicative meanings.

According to Nuan (2004), task-based language teaching (TBLT) is noted for its five features. First, the contents of TBLT meet students' needs since it is a need-based approach. Second, TBLT focuses learning through interaction in the target language. Third, TBLT utilizes a significant amount of authentic texts to strengthen the bond between classroom and real-world language. Fourth, TBLT provides opportunities for students not only to learn the language itself, but also to acquire knowledge from the learning process. Fifth, TBLT involves a great deal of students' personal experiences in classroom learning.

In terms of definition and features, TBLT looks the same as communicative language teaching (CLT). Are the terms synonymous? If so, why are there two terms for the same concept? If not, where does the difference lie? The answer is that CLT is a broad, philosophical approach to the language curriculum that draws on scientific theory and research. TBLT is this philosophy in action at the levels of syllabus design and methodology (Nuan, 2004).

3.2.2 A task framework

The core of TBLT is 'task.' What types of tasks should be incorporated in TBLT? What is the weight of linguistic elements in TBLT? The answers to these questions constitute a task framework.

SL teaching aims at enabling students to use the language in the real world. Therefore, teachers have to create learning opportunities for students to master the language, and eventually to be able to use it outside the classroom. Basically, we do three things with language (Halliday, 1985). First, we use it to exchange goods and services. Second, we use it to socialize with other people. Third, we use it for enjoyment. Teachers need to transform these real-life tasks into classroom tasks.

These real-life tasks, Nunan suggested (2004), can be placed on a continuum from rehearsal tasks to activation tasks. As is implied by the name, rehearsal tasks refer to those that imitate real-world tasks, such as asking students to complete a task called ‘Apply for a Job’ in which students first look through job postings and then write a resume. Activation tasks, on the other hand, include role plays, simulations, problem-solving tasks, etc. They do not have such a clear and obvious relationship to the real world. With activation tasks, students are encouraged to activate familiar words, structures, and expressions in novel ways. Nunan (2004) contends that students truly acquire the language when they use it in creative ways because such use requires the integration of emerging language skills and resources.

TBLT is communicative-oriented; however, TBLT is not ignorant of the form of language. Many researchers have claimed that learners can benefit from a focus on form (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 1983). In addition, learners cannot be expected to construct language if they lack familiarity with its grammatical, lexical, and phonological underpinnings. Teachers must be responsible for showing their students the systematic interrelationships that exist between form, meaning, and use (Larsen-Freeman, 2001).

The purpose of form-focused work is to enable students to develop the skills and knowledge that will ultimately facilitate the process of authentic communications. Thus, these linguistic skills are so-called “enabling skills” (Kumaravadivelu, 1991). In TBLT, there are two types of enabling skills: language exercises and communicative activities. Language exercises can cover items in lexicon, phonology, and grammar.

In conclusion, the task framework incorporates two types of tasks, rehearsal and activation tasks. The rehearsal tasks are designed to familiarize students with scenarios in the real world, and the activation tasks help students develop creative use of language with an aim of transferring it outside the classroom. Enabling skills, interwoven with rehearsal and activation tasks, reinforce students’ linguistic competence and promote authentic communication.

3.2.3 Developing a task instructional sequence

Nunan (2004) provides a five-step procedure model for developing a task-based lesson. The first step is schema building, in which teachers introduce the topic, set the context for the tasks, and teach key vocabulary and phrases needed to carry out the task. The second step is controlled practice, in which students are encouraged to use the target language vocabulary and phrases. Teachers can first present students with a dialogue, then ask them to read it in pairs, and to practice its variations on this conversation model. Step 1 and Step 2 function as scaffolding that builds up and consolidates students’ language skills.

Moving on to Step 3, students are given authentic listening material. The use of authentic material better links the classroom language with the language used in the real world. In step 4, students are instilled with linguistic knowledge, different from the traditional approach, in which the presentation of linguistic knowledge always occurs in Step 1. The linguistic part is postponed because it is easier for students to understand abstract grammatical concepts after hearing, seeing, and speaking the target language within a communicative context.

Step 5 is the introduction of the classroom task itself. The task should integrate the knowledge gained and the language skills practiced in the previous steps. For example, if students have been instructed on the topic of finding a B&B and given a significant amount of language practice in this area, the classroom task can be to ask students to go on the internet and choose a suitable B&B after considering prices, services, and locations.

4. INTERLANGUAGE TALK FOR SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

In Taiwan, English is a foreign language. It implies that the linguistic input for students learning English is mainly from teachers and peer interactions. The teacher’s part is concerned with instruction, which has been discussed in the preceding sections of this paper. This section investigates the effect of interlanguage talk in second language acquisition. Interlanguage talk here refers to non-native/non-native conversation in classrooms. Group work is favored by some teachers in Taiwan and interlanguage talk occurs in this kind of classroom activity. Whether the deviant input facilitates or impedes second language acquisition has great practical importance for

teachers. This section gives an account of the place of interlanguage talk on SL development, and the effect of group work on SL performance.

4.1 Studies on Interlanguage Talk

In order to obtain unknown information from non-native speakers, native speakers (NSs) usually modify their speech by using higher-frequency vocabulary items or slowing down speech rate (Sharan, 1999). The point here is that a modified form of language does help non-native learners to comprehend in that they produce appropriate responses to native speakers' requests. Studies (Chaudron, 1983; Long, 1983) have also demonstrated clear improvements in comprehension among groups of non-native speakers (NNSs) as a result of specific and global modifications.

These findings are consistent with the idea proposed by Krashen (1982) that learning takes place if students are provided with comprehensible input, i.e., spoken language that is understandable to the learner or just a little beyond the learner's level. In other words, the more language that learners hear and understand or the more comprehensible input they receive, the faster and better they learn.

The problem with EFL teachers is that it is unlikely that they will be able to provide enough NS/NNS opportunities for all their students. It is therefore indispensable to know whether two (or more) non-native speakers working together during group work can perform the same kind of negotiation for meaning, which can facilitate language learning. In other words, does interlanguage talk among non-native speakers during group work help improve English proficiency? The research findings on interlanguage talk are summarized below.

In terms of the amount of speech, Doughty and Pica (1984) found that individual students talked more in their groups than in their teacher-fronted discussions. The reason may be that a more supportive and less threatening group environment makes students feel secure and thus prompts more utterances.

As for the range of language functions, students in group work practice a wider range (such as rhetorical, pedagogical, and interpersonal) than in teacher-oriented teaching (Long, Adams, McLean, & Castanos, 1976). The result makes sense because in group work, students are normally assigned projects which require negotiation, discussion, coordination, clarification, confirmation, and many other functional skills. On the other hand, the teacher-led learning mode offers few opportunities for classroom interactions and therefore hinders students from practicing the variety of language functions that exist in a real situation.

As far as accuracy is concerned, there is no significant difference between the lockstep work directed by the teacher and unsupervised group work (Long & Porter, 1985). This evidence is a relief to teachers who are afraid that students will reinforce each other's errors during group work without presenting the teachers an opportunity to correct them. As a matter of fact, McDonough's research (2004) shows that students still make the same type of error no matter how much effort teachers make to correct them. Errors are inevitable in the process of learning a foreign language. It is not worthwhile to diminish opportunities for developing communicative skills at the cost of requiring perfect accuracy.

In short, group work, provided that two-way communicative tasks are assigned for completion, encourages longer and sensible interlanguage talk. Moreover, the accuracy problem of interlanguage talk fortunately does not do any damage to the process of language learning, according to research studies. That research findings on interlanguage talk generally support group work is a compelling reason for teachers to incorporate this technique into their instruction.

4.2 Implications from Studies on Interlanguage Talk

Interlanguage talk refers to conversation between non-native speakers in classrooms. This type of talk occurs in group work. Since interlanguage talk has benefits in learning, the following discusses the advantages of group work.

In traditional classrooms, teachers function in an active role while students are left without any option but a passive role. To be more specific, teachers do most of the talking during class hours; students, on the other hand, are allowed only to sit quietly and listen to teachers' lectures (Chen,

1998). This teacher-dominated learning environment may exert several detrimental effects on students' language learning. The first harmful effect of this teacher-directed method of instruction is that not enough time is allocated for students to practice the new language. Another negative influence is that students depend heavily on teachers. This hinders the development of their independent, creative, and critical thinking abilities (Wei, 1997).

In contrast to traditional teaching, a cooperative learning environment, in which students collaborate as a group to achieve a common goal, is claimed by scholars overseas and in Taiwan to have potential benefits to facilitate language learning (Liang, 1996; McGroarty, 1989).

There are at least four advantages of group work in foreign language learning. The first advantage is that group work increases language practice opportunities. In a traditional classroom, teachers lecture for most of the class session (Fanselow, 1977). Little time is allocated for students to practice the new language and hence, they are usually inadequate linguistically. By contrast, group work takes up to 80% of class time, which in turn significantly increases the number of practice opportunities for each individual student.

Another advantage is that group work improves the quality of student talk. In the lockstep type of lessons, teachers are usually the only initiators of talk, and they frequently ask questions with one correct answer known to both parties, like "Do you go to school on Sundays?" (Long & Sato, 1983). One-way and artificial types of dialogues rarely exist in the real world.

Conversely, students in a small group are given a natural setting for face to face communication. More meaningful activities, where students take on roles and adopt positions, allow students to practice a range of language functions (Long, Adams, McLean, & Castanos, 1976). While planning an overseas graduation trip, for example, they can suggest, evaluate, negotiate, inform, describe, and persuade. Instead of making hurried, isolated sentences in the teacher-led classroom, students in group work can develop discourse competence by engaging in cohesive and coherent sequences of utterances. At the same time, students can augment conversation skills, namely topic-nomination, turn-allocation, focusing, summarizing, and clarifying, which are normally handled by the teacher in a lockstep classroom. Quite often, a traditional classroom does not provide sufficient opportunities to foster communicative skills which are otherwise made up in a cooperative learning classroom with the use of group work.

The fact that group work makes individualizing instruction possible in a classroom is its third advantage. In a teacher-centered classroom, teachers do the same lectures to students regardless of individual differences in personality, aptitude, learning style, motivation, prior language learning experience, and target language needs. Overlooking individual differences can minimize learning outcomes. For instance, shy students may not appreciate teachers who randomly call students to make an impromptu speech in public.

Clearly, group work cannot cater to all these differences. Once again, however, it can help. Small groups of students can work on different sets of materials suited to their needs, and they can each be assigned types of work based on their personalities and learning styles.

Take a term project as an example. The task is to make an audio/video book; that is, the book is not only tape recorded but also provides images related to the contents. Other than asking individual students to complete the project on their own, a group collaboration of four to six students is a more ideal option since there is much power in solidarity. Each group can be assigned their favorite genre of book, such as fairy tales, science discoveries, tourist attractions, etc. On the other hand, group members do a specific task based on their strengths, such as story-writing, art-design, tape-recording, and so on. In other words, individual needs will more likely be met in group work than in teacher-dominated lessons.

A fourth advantage is that group work promotes a positive affective climate and motivates students to learn. Teachers are the only controller or authority that dominates students' learning processes in a traditional classroom. In addition, students are put under a competitive learning environment in which they fight alone in order to defeat their opponents for their own success.

However, a small group of peers provides a relatively intimate setting and a supportive environment in which they can try out second language skills. In other words, students are put in small groups to learn together with peers and are motivated to pursue group goals. Littlejohn

(1983) found in his study that students feel less inhibited and freer to speak, and make fewer mistakes in the small group than in the teacher-led classroom.

In brief, group work is strongly recommended, from a pedagogical point of view, as at least a complement to lockstep instruction. Both quantity and quality of student talk can improve as a consequence of a variety of communicative tasks employed in group work. Furthermore, group work motivates students to learn by providing a supportive climate in a classroom.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed three areas of SLA research: types of data analysis, effects of instruction, and interlanguage talk studies. Regarding types of data analysis, contrastive analysis of the native and target language is one method of increasing students' awareness of language differences, which may in turn facilitate SL learning. Error analysis, on the other hand, assists teachers in gauging students' achievements and subsequently providing suitable instruction to enhance learning.

As for effects of instruction, while some early SLA investigations inferred from a similar developmental sequence between the native and target language that teaching had an insubstantial effect on SL performance, later investigations have revealed a significant amount of positive evidence. Task-based language teaching, both meaning- and form- focused, has a facilitating effect on the development of students' communicative competence.

Students are the focal point of SL learning, and they themselves have much to contribute to the process of learning. Interlanguage talk, the interaction between students learning SL, can lead to the acquisition of the target language. Group work contributes to the improvement of the quality or naturalness of interlanguage talk. A relaxing effective climate is established, and an increase in students' motivation becomes evident.

SLA researchers have devoted a significant amount of time to a variety of issues, the end goal of which is to provide language teachers with insights and reflections that will maximize the effects of their instruction and to develop the proficiency of language learners. Because of time limitations, this paper has addressed only a small number of topics. Hopefully, even given the limited number of topics addressed here, this paper will provide those involved in language education some insights to the importance of SLA research so that the learning experience of secondary language learners will continue to improve.

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