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Fostering oral interaction in the EFL classroom

Assessment and effects of experimental interventions

van Batenburg, E.S.L.

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Chapter 1

General introduction

This thesis explores ways to develop pre-vocational learners' ability and affect (willingness to communicate, self-confidence and enjoyment) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL oral interaction through instruction, as well as ways in which individual speakers' interactional ability can be assessed reliably. In this chapter, we discuss the background, aims and scope of the research project, followed by an outline of the thesis.

Background to the study

In today's globalized society, English is used as the language for wider communication situated in various contexts, i.e., in personal, public, occupational and educational contexts (Council of Europe, 2001). Over the years, consensus has grown that the primary goal of foreign language education is to enable language learners to become competent language users. With regard to oral interaction, this implies that foreign language curricula should develop learners' interactional ability, i.e., their ability to achieve communicative goals in interaction, and to convey and understand communicative intent in interaction with others in real time (cf. Celce-Murcia, 2007).

Real-time interaction is cognitively taxing. First, it is mediated by time constraints, and is therefore mostly unplanned. This requires speakers to conceptualise, formulate and articulate messages more or less in parallel (Levelt, 1999). Secondly, it is reciprocal. This requires speakers to both produce and understand messages in real time, to adjust messages to their speech partner's understanding, and to monitor and manage the interactional encounter itself (Bygate, 1987). Meeting these demands hinges on four conditions: 1) linguistic *knowledge*, 2) the ability to *use* this knowledge in real time, 3) the ability to do so appropriately in specific *contexts* and 4) the ability to use self-supporting and other-supporting *strategies*, such as compensation- and meaning negotiation strategies, that help speakers address potential communicative problems (cf. Canale, 1983a; 1983b; Celce-Murcia, 2007).

Engagement in oral interaction is not only dependent on speakers' interactional ability, but also on their affective states. Affective variables related to communication include speakers' *willingness to communicate* (WTC), which is defined as the readiness to engage in discourse with specific people in specific situations (MacIntyre et al., 1998). It also includes speakers' *self-confidence* that they will be successful in a specific situation (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Self-confidence is defined as a combination of speakers' perceived competence and low levels of anxiety (Clément et al., 1977). *Enjoyment* is seen as a positive emotion that runs parallel to the negative emotion of anxiety (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Enjoyment is

defined as the feeling of elation or pleasure speakers gain from interacting with people in specific situations (Kang, 2005).

EFL oral interaction in the pre-vocational track

EFL teachers in the Netherlands underwrite the importance of developing oral interaction skills that enable learners to achieve real-life goals both in informal, personal settings, and in more formal educational and occupational settings (Fasoglio, 2017). Oral interaction has been an official goal for EFL teaching since 1986 (Kwakernaak, 2016). Exam programmes for all educational tracks list attainment targets for performing a range of communicative language functions (e.g. giving and receiving information), and for learning strategies to help achieve interactional goals and to compensate for deficiencies in linguistic- or communicative knowledge (College voor Toetsing en Examens, 2017).

For pre-vocational learners, developing strong EFL oral interaction skills is indispensable. These learners are headed for further vocational education and employment at middle-management levels (cf. Liemberg & Van Kleunen, 1998), where they will need to interact in English for occupational purposes, i.e., in service encounters with non-Dutch customers as part of their job. EFL teachers in the vocational programmes, however, report that pre-vocational learners are too hesitant to engage in EFL oral interaction, and at times fail to meet the required level of accuracy and fluency upon entering vocational programmes (Jansma & Pennewaard, 2014).

Meanwhile, EFL teachers indicate that they lack the methodological tools for assessing and developing their learners' oral interaction skills when faced with large classes and limited contact- and preparation time (Fasoglio, 2015; Jansma & Pennewaard, 2014). Teachers tend to make limited use of the target language as the language for instruction (Bonnet, 2002; Kordes & Gille, 2012) and make little use of opportunities for oral interaction, particularly for practising meaning negotiation and other functional communication strategies (Educational Inspectorate, 2004). The methods of assessment of oral interaction skills are determined by language departments at individual schools. This results in large diversity amongst schools in terms of test format, test content and weighting of oral interaction skills in the final grade (Fasoglio, 2015) as well as the degree and frequency of oral interaction practice offered to learners (Fasoglio, 2017). Additionally, not all test formats that Fasoglio (2017) reports are frequently used by teachers in the pre-vocational tracks establish valid measures of oral interactional ability (e.g. reading a text out loud) or reliable assessments of learners' individual ability during interactional encounters (e.g. a conversation with a peer).

Aim and scope of the thesis

The above discussion shows the importance of developing strong EFL oral interaction skills for pre-vocational learners on the one hand, and the lack of knowledge into ways to effectively develop and assess these skills on the other. Therefore, this thesis sets out to evaluate the opportunities for developing pre-vocational learners' oral interactional ability in Dutch EFL coursebooks, to explore ways to assess oral interactional ability and to establish what instructional approaches best foster both the development of pre-vocational learners' oral interactional ability and positive affect (WTC, self-confidence and enjoyment).

Previous research

To date, little classroom-based research has focused specifically on Dutch pre-vocational learners' development in foreign language classrooms, and investigations of oral skills development for such learners are lacking altogether. The SALS project (Study into Adolescent Literacy of Students At-Risk) investigated pre-vocational learners' development in reading and writing in the L1 (see e.g. De Milliano, 2013; Trapman, 2015; Van Kruistum, 2013; Van Steensel et al., 2014). However, no research has been conducted that provides insight into the effects of specific instructional programmes on improving pre-vocational learners' oral interaction skills in the FL classroom.

Outside of the Netherlands, education directed at EFL oral interaction has also received limited attention in research. Research that analyzes educational activities that foster oral interaction development in *course materials* is scarce. Some analyses directed at EFL education in general (e.g. Burns & Hill, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012; 2013) demonstrated that course materials tend to focus mainly on developing language knowledge, and favour the use of form-focused tasks (e.g. pre-scripted dialogues, in which speech is prepared beforehand and speakers' roles are prescribed and known to the learners). The use of language knowledge in meaning-focused tasks (e.g. information gap tasks that engage learners in interaction in order to exchange the information required for successful task completion) is seldom practiced, as is the instruction and practice of interactional strategies (Bueno-Alastuey and Luque Agulló, 2015a; Dörnyei and Thurrell, 1994; Faucette, 2001). In addition, no research is available that sheds light on the contexts of use in which EFL oral interaction practice is situated in course materials, i.e., in the personal, public, occupational and educational contexts identified by the Council of Europe (2001).

With regards to *assessment*, the literature has mainly focused on the obstacles in testing individual ability in oral interaction. Because much of discourse

is co-constructed (Kramsch, 1986), individual performance becomes vulnerable to interlocutor effects, which poses challenges to standardization in testing and complicates the assessment of individual interactional ability (Weir, 2005). Previous studies have not yet proposed an assessment format that can reliably disentangle individual contributions from a paired exchange for the assessment of individual ability, nor one that focuses on assessing both speakers' linguistic and strategic abilities.

With regards to *instruction*, prior research has shown that form-focused teaching positively affects the acquisition of linguistic forms. However, the effects of form-focused instruction on interactional ability (i.e., on learners' ability to achieve communicative goals in interaction) are largely unknown (Ellis, 2006; Lightbown, 2000; Norris & Ortega, 2000). There is some indication that strategy-focused instruction positively affects both interactional ability (Lam, 2006) and self-confidence (Cohen, Weaver & Li, 1996; Forbes & Fisher, 2015; Lam, 2006), but no studies are available that investigate how form-focused instruction impacts on learners' interactional ability, nor how either form- or strategies-focused instruction affects learners' WTC and enjoyment of EFL oral interaction. Furthermore, despite indications that oral performance is context-bound (e.g. Bygate, 1987; MacIntyre et al., 1998), no research is available that investigates the degree to which the effects of interaction instruction are dependent on the context of use in which this instruction is situated.

With respect to *task type*, form-focused pre-scripted tasks are known to play an important role in learners' automatization of knowledge of language forms when moving from declarative to procedural knowledge through repeated practice (Anderson, 1982), but studies into the effect of this task type on the development of oral interactional ability are not available. The effects of meaning-focused information gap tasks on interactional ability have also not been investigated, although the negotiated interaction that results from information gap activities has been found to affect language acquisition positively (e.g. Doughty & Pica, 1986; Gass et al., 1998; Long, 2015). No studies are available that research the effect of task type on learners' enjoyment, willingness to communicate and self-confidence, but there are some indications that favour the use of information gap tasks for this purpose, e.g. for boosting learner enjoyment (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014), risk-taking (Leaver & Kaplan, 2004), dealing with the unpredictability of real-world interaction (Willis, 1996) and practising solutions for interactional problems during interaction (Pica, Kanagy & Falodun, 2009).

Finally, MacIntyre et al. (2001) argues that higher levels of WTC increase opportunities for language practice and usage and as such facilitates the learning process, but the relation between increased WTC and achieving communicative

goals in EFL oral interaction has not been empirically tested, nor have studies investigated the relation between increased levels of self-confidence or enjoyment and goal achievement in oral interaction.

In short, oral interaction instruction has remained largely under-researched in the FL literature. As a result, both language teachers and language teacher educators have little access to knowledge about ways to develop pre-vocational learners' oral interaction skills through instruction in the (foreign) language classroom, nor about how such individual development can be assessed. In light of this situation, we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do commonly used EFL course materials commercially produced in The Netherlands provide pre-vocational learners with opportunities to develop their oral interactional abilities?
2. Can EFL learners' individual interactional ability be assessed in a valid and reliable manner using interactive speech tasks?
3. What are the effects of instructional focus and task type on pre-vocational learners' EFL oral interactional ability?
4. What are the effects of instructional focus and task type on the development of pre-vocational learners' WTC, self-confidence and enjoyment, and how does this relate to task achievement in EFL oral interaction?

Outline of the thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters. Following this introduction, chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 present four studies, and chapter 6 is reserved for a general discussion of our findings.

Chapter 2 presents an evaluation study focused on the evaluation of current pedagogical EFL practices for improving oral interactional ability in course material. A coding scheme that operationalises the conditions for interactional ability (cf. Celce-Murcia, 2007) was developed and used to analyse coursebooks from Dutch publishing houses that are most commonly used with third-year pre-vocational learners, namely *Stepping Stones*, *New Interface* and *All Right!*.

Chapter 3 discusses a validation study of a new test format specifically geared towards measuring EFL speakers' individual interactional ability: scripted speech tasks. In this format, one candidate's interactional performance is tested in interaction with an interlocutor and the interlocutor's contributions are controlled through the use of scripts. The validity and reliability of six tasks, situated in two interactional contexts (professional and personal) are analyzed, reported and discussed.

Chapter 4 reports on an experimental study that evaluates the effects of newly developed instructional programmes directed at pre-vocational learners' ability in EFL oral interaction. These programmes are situated in the Business & Administration context, but differ in instructional focus (form-focused vs strategy-focused) and type of task (pre-scripted tasks vs information gap tasks). The effects of these programmes on EFL oral interaction skills are compared to the effects of business-as-usual EFL instruction.

In chapter 5, we evaluate the effects of the aforementioned instructional programmes on the short-term development of learner affect, i.e., on learners' willingness to communicate, self-confidence and enjoyment of EFL oral interaction. This study furthermore explores the relationship between development on these measures and learners' achievement in EFL oral interaction.

Finally, chapter 6 briefly recapitulates the background of the research project, after which the results of each study are summarized. This is followed by a discussion of the results, suggestions for future research and implications for educational practice.

Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 were written as independent journal articles and have all been submitted to international journals. The advantage of this is that each chapter can be read separately. A disadvantage is that a certain amount of overlap between chapters is unavoidable.