Attending to language form in beginner classroom interactions

What this research was about and why it is important

It is important to provide enough opportunities in the language classroom for interaction because conversations with teachers and peers allow learners to practice the language they are studying. This is particularly important in contexts where learners are studying a language they do not hear outside the language classroom. But do such interactions also provide opportunities to attend to language (i.e., grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling) while they are communicating? This study addressed this question and looked at interactions in beginner French and Spanish language classrooms. The researchers found that frequent instances of attention to language form during pair and small group conversations in the language classroom. Learners initiated many of these and they focused mainly on word choice.

What the researchers did

- Participants were 21 13-year old learners of French (10 learners) and 14-year old learners of Spanish (11 learners). They were in their first year of learning French and their second year of learning Spanish.
- The researchers observed and recorded three lessons in each classroom. They also took observation notes.
- French learners were reviewing hobbies, preferences, and biographical information for an oral assessment. Spanish learners were completing a unit on shopping for food. Most activities were done in pairs or groups of 3. Examples:
  - Learners choose a picture of various food items and use it to write a shopping list in Spanish (pairs).
  - Learners discuss 6 ways in which supermarkets and shops are different, writing down their decisions in Spanish (groups).
- All interactions were transcribed. The researchers noted all instances where learners talked about language they were producing, questioned their language use, corrected their language production or were corrected by others. They analysed:
  - Who initiated the focus on language form (teachers or learners)
  - If the focus on language came after a problem in communication or occurred on its own
  - If the instances focused on pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar or spelling
  - What type of language problem was addressed
  - Who responded (teacher or learners)
  - What kind of response they gave
  - If the responses were correct
  - In which language the responses were given

What the researchers found

- Learners initiated much more of the focus on language form during their interactions than teachers (83% vs 17%).
- A little over half of the instances of a focus on language followed a problem in communication. The rest were questions about language from learners even though there was no problem in communication.
- Most of the questions were about vocabulary (68%), followed by grammar and pronunciation. Attention to spelling was rare, accounting for less than 5% of the instances.
- The majority of questions about vocabulary focused on finding the right word in the target language (41%). Other questions arose when a learner used the wrong word (30%) or mispronounced a word (19%).
- Fewer questions were about grammar. Roughly 13% of questions arose because learners had used a grammatical feature incorrectly.
- Teachers responded to the majority of questions, but learners were also able to provide responses to each other in close to 40% of the cases. These responses were almost always correct.
- French or Spanish (target language) was used in most of the responses – either exclusively, or together with English

Things to consider

This study showed that classroom conversations provide opportunities for learners to attend to language form, even when learners have low language proficiency. This shows that vocabulary, and to some degree grammar and pronunciation are not only learned during dedicated language lessons but also when students interact with each other. It is important to note that not only teachers but also other learners provided answers to questions, and they tended to use the target language when doing so.


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