Facilitating Learner Interaction: The Role of Proficiency Level in Grouping

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent studies on second language acquisition, given impetus by Krashen's input hypothesis claiming that 'comprehensible input' (i.e., the language that is directed to and understood by learners) promotes language acquisition, have most often focused on native/non-native conversation. In these studies, native speakers of English were found to make linguistic and conversational adjustments, by which they make their input comprehensible to learners. Linguistic adjustments include simplifying and slowing the rate of their speech, and conversational adjustments involve frequently checking their partner's comprehension, requesting clarification and so on. The input created through these adjustments is believed to assist learners in acquiring the target language.

Swain (1985), on the other hand, claims that 'comprehensible input' is not sufficient for language acquisition, but 'comprehensible output' is more crucial. By 'comprehensible output' she means the language that learners make comprehensible to interlocutors in communicating ideas. Swain's claim stems from the evidence that French immersion students, in spite of long-term exposure to comprehensible input, failed to acquire native-like oral use of the target language. She maintains that learners must be given opportunities for the syntactic processing of the target language in communicating their intended meaning.

While much importance is attached to both 'comprehensible

input' and 'comprehensible output', because of pedagogical concerns attention has also been paid to learner talk. In ESL/EFL classroom situations, learners interact with other learners far more often than with native speakers of English. Thus, many studies have examined non-native/non-native interaction, in comparison with that of native/non-native. Porter (1986), for example, found that learners talked significantly more to other learners than to native speakers. Varonis and Gass (1985), who studied what they call 'nonunderstanding routines', found that negotiation sequences occurred more frequently in non-native dyads than in native/non-native dyads. These studies, along with those reviewed in Long and Porter (1985), indicate that learners can expect to have more quantity and variety of practice and more negotiation in conversation with other learners than with native speakers of English.

Further, much research has sought to identify what factors increase learners' amount of speech and interaction. The underlying assumption is that increased speech and interaction would facilitate learning a language. Factors identified so far are task type (one-way vs. two-way information exchange task), group size, and interlocutor traits such as sex difference, first language background, proficiency level and verbal style (active vs. passive); these factors were found to affect learners' speech and interactional adjustments (see Long 1983, Doughty and Pica 1986, Gass and Varonis 1985, 1986, Cameron and Epling 1989).

Among these factors, the present study is most concerned with interlocutor traits, particularly language proficiency level. While studies so far have demonstrated that groups of mixed proficiency levels provide learners with more opportunities for conversational adjustments, two previous studies have presented somewhat confounding results with respect to who benefits from such mixed grouping.

Ross (1988) compared two types of grouping, one comprising

Japanese learners of different proficiency levels ('low intermediate' and 'low elementary') and the other consisting of those of equal proficiency levels. He found that it was the lower proficiency learners that derived benefits from mixing dyads because they obtained considerably more opportunities for 'comprehensible output' through the higher proficiency learners' frequent questioning. Porter (1986), on the other hand, found that higher proficiency learners ('advanced' in her study) also benefited from talking to lower proficiency learners ('intermediate') due to their obtaining more chances for the negotiation of meaning which occurred frequently in such mixed dyads. These studies suggest that findings regarding the effects of interlocutor proficiency level are still inconclusive.

2. THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study was motivated by three concerns. First, as mentioned above, the effects of interlocutor proficiency level have not yet been made clear. Thus, we attempted to elucidate this issue more precisely by examining learners of three different proficiency levels: high, intermediate and low.

Secondly, we sought to examine the relationship between language proficiency and learners' speech production and interaction. Our previous study (Kobayashi and Hirose 1990) revealed that English and non-English majors differed in their English speech and interactional pattern. The findings suggested that such difference was linked to the learners' language proficiency rather than to their majors; however, learner proficiency was not measured in the study.

Thirdly, unlike most studies which examine dyads for interactions, the present study attempted to investigate learners' speech and interaction produced in group work of four members. This is because although group work seems to have gained as much

popularity as pair work in classrooms, few empirical studies of groups have actually been undertaken.

Thus, the present study aims to answer the following two research questions:

(1) Is there any relationship between learners' proficiency levels and their speech production and interaction?

(2) What effect does interlocutor proficiency level have on learners' speech production and interaction?

For the first question, comparison was made among learners of three different proficiency levels in homogeneous groups. For the second question, comparison was made among learners in two kinds of grouping: homogeneous and heterogeneous, with separate within-subject comparisons while speaking with (1) same level vs. higher level and (2) same level vs. lower level.

3. METHOD

3.1 Subjects

A total of 24 Japanese university students (13 males and 11 females) were chosen as subjects from a sample of 43 students who were enrolled in a comparative culture course being taught in English at Hiroshima University. All 43 students took the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and an oral test (see APPENDIX). Since a strong correlation was obtained between the scores on these two tests (r=0.875), the selection was made primarily on the basis of their scores on the oral test. The eight highest scoring students were selected for the high group and the eight lowest scoring students for the low group: the other eight for the intermediate group were then drawn at random from among the remaining students.

Consequently, three groups with the following characteristics were formed: high (TOEFL mean=566.8, range=530–603; oral test mean=52.3, range=45–60), intermediate (TOEFL mean=511.6, range

457-553; oral test mean=36.9, range 33–40) and low (TOEFL mean=465.1, range 407–497; oral test mean=25.2, range 18–27). One-way analyses of variance indicate significant differences between the 3 groups both in the TOEFL (F=26.3, $p < .01$) and the oral test scores (F=75.9, $p < .01$).

3.2 Data Collection

Spoken data were collected from two group discussions, which were carried out in a normal classroom situation. The first discussion was done in heterogeneous grouping, where two learners were matched with two others of a different language proficiency level; the second was in homogeneous groups. In the heterogeneous grouping, two groups were formed for each of the possible combinations: low and intermediate, intermediate and high, and low and high. For the homogeneous groups, two groups were formed for each level: low, intermediate and high. Each subject, therefore, participated in two discussions. The topic for the first discussion was "What are the expected problems of international marriage?"; that for the second, "What are the good points of international marriage?" The topics were first introduced by the teacher presenting relevant information and showing a videotape. The discussions were open-ended, with the learners being expected to share opinions and information with one another, but not necessarily to arrive at a decision. Of the total of recorded discussion, the first 16 minutes of each discussion were transcribed for coding.

3.3 Data Analysis

The present study applied the same two types of analysis as used in our previous study (Kobayashi and Hirose 1990). Speech production was analyzed by counting total turns, total communication units (c-units) and total words per subject, as well as learners' use of both redundant words (R-words) and sentence-nodes (S-nodes; see definitions of each measure below). Interactional patterns were categorized into the eleven types which had been

developed in the previous study. The measures were defined as follows:

Turn: In our analysis, turns, both solicited and unsolicited, are basically all included except back-channels in which the interlocutor, without intent to gain the floor, gives a signal for assent by uttering "Mhm" or "uh huh" or signals confirmation by partially repeating the current speaker's utterance.

C-unit: This is a minimal unit of communication based on semantic or pragmatic meaning rather than grammaticality. As long as an utterance conveys such meaning, a c-unit can be a word, a phrase, or a sentence (Brock 1985). The portions segmented by slashes are c-units:

S1: /Let's start.//Who will break the ice?//You please.//Actually, I I still have no idea.//I I want to have few time some time to think of my idea./

S2: /Me too./

R-word: R-words are defined as words redundantly uttered as the speaker is in the process of putting his or her intended meaning into syntactic structure. Words for false starts, self-corrections and repetitions are all counted, but not words for semantic rephrasing or repetitions for emphasis. In the following extract, the underlined part is considered an instance of R-words, but the double-underlined part is not.

S: For example, the in my hometown Tokushima Prefecture, there are many many young men young men who can not, uh, cannot marry, uh, of course, there is, there are few young girls in the village, so they are, they invite some Filipinos. Uh, and they get married to each other, but uh some many of them uh got divorced. I read the it, I read the news in the newspaper, so...uh...

S-nodes: Following Brock (1985) and Duff (1986), we used S-nodes to examine the syntactic complexity of the speaker's utterances. Three grammatical forms -- tensed verbs, gerunds, and infinitives -- are considered to signal an underlying S-node (Brock 1985).

For the analysis of interactional patterns, we developed eleven

categories from learners' speech data. These categories are subsumed into three major categories based on the following functions: communicative, linguistic, and social. The first five categories *(clarifying, confirming, prompting, checking comprehension* and *code-switching)* are characterized as carrying a 'communicative' function: they prevent communication breakdowns and maintain information exchange relevant to a topic being discussed. The next two categories *(correcting* and *word-searching and checking)* are concerned with form; more precisely, their function is to seek grammatical and lexical correctness of usage when the speaker expresses ideas in the target language. Because of their focus on form, we call them 'linguistic'. The last four categories *(expressing rapport, soliciting turns, directing discussion* and *facilitating utterance)* deal with both social and procedural aspects of the act of discussion which help to carry out the act smoothly. They may all be generally regarded as having a 'social' function. Although all the eleven categories are based on the three functions mentioned, it should be noted that they do not necessarily represent all possible patterns for each function.[2]

Prior to data analysis, interrater reliability between the two raters was tested. For the four measures related to oral production (words, c-units, R-words and S-nodes), the raters achieved an average of 99% agreement, and for interactional patterns, 95%. After interrater reliability was achieved, all the transcripts were coded by the two raters separately.

Statistical computation followed the coding. For the first research question, one-way analyses of variation, involving data gathered through homogeneous groups, were applied to determine whether there was any relationship between language proficiency and speech production and interaction. For the second question, two-way analyses of variance with repeated measures on the interlocutor proficiency factor were used. While the latter analyses were

concerned with the effects of two factors, we will report only those involving the interlocutor factor because the speaker factor is dealt with in the first section.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Relation of language proficiency to speech production and interaction

The means of the seven measures for speech production and those of selected interactional categories are presented in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. The main effects of language proficiency were significant at the level of $p < .05$ for total turns (F =5.37), total c-units (F =4.65), total words (F =4.60) and R-words/100 words (F =3.85). Regarding these four measures, the post hoc test (Newman-Keules test) showed a consistent pattern among the three groups; while the two higher groups did not differ significantly from each other, the intermediate outperformed the low group significantly ($p < .05$), but the high group did so only marginally ($.1 < p < .05$, except R-words/100 words, $p < .05$). For the remaining three measures, which deal with the length of turn and c-unit and syntactic complexity, no significant effects were found.

Regarding interaction, the main effects were not significant for total occurrences nor for the three major categories. Yet, the Newman-Keules test revealed that, as in speech production, the intermediate group outperformed the low group significantly at the level of $p < .05$ in the total occurrences of interaction (means for intermediate=9; low=3.25) and one of the major categories, *linguistic* (intermediate=1.88; low=0.00). Among the subcategories, the intermediate group also used *confirming* and *correcting* significantly more often than the low group (see Table 2). Similar to the findings on speech production, the high group did not differ significantly either from the intermediate or from the low group in any interactional categories.

Table 1: Means of Seven Measures for Speech Production

Measure	High	Intermediate	Low	*F*
Total turns	22.75	32.75	6.00	*
Total c-units	39.00	55.00	11.75	*
Total words	251.38	365.25	83.75	*
Words/turn	12.13	9.83	13.46	
Words/c-unit	6.40	5.84	7.05	
S-nodes/c-unit	1.05	0.90	1.14	
R-words/100 words	6.48	7.34	13.76	*

Interlocutor effect F (df=2, 21) *p <.05

Table 2: Means of Categories for Interaction*

Interaction	High	Intermediate	Low	*F*
Total occurrence	5.63	9.00	3.25	#
Communicative	3.63	6.00	2.13	
[Confirming	1.63	3.00	0.63	#
Linguistic	1.38	1.88	0.00	#
[Correcting	1.00	1.50	0.00	#
Social	0.63	1.13	1.13	
[Soliciting	0.25	0.38	1.00	

Differences between Intermediate and Low are significant at the level of p < .05.

* The frequencies of all subcategories are not listed here.

The above findings suggest that while the amount of speech production corresponds to the frequency of interaction (Figures 1 and 2), the amount of speech is not necessarily proportionate to the level of

language proficiency once the proficiency reaches a considerably higher level.

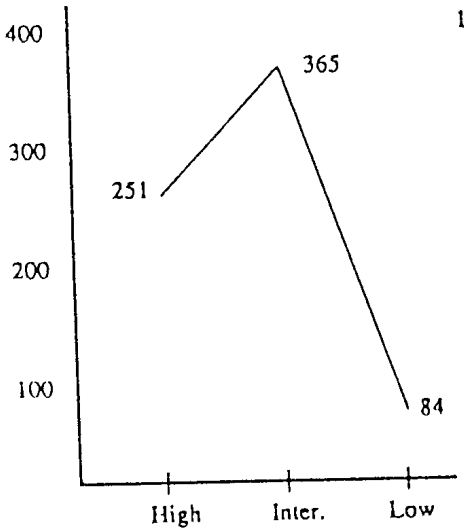

Figure 1 Total Words per Subject

(Numbers rounded to nearest integer)

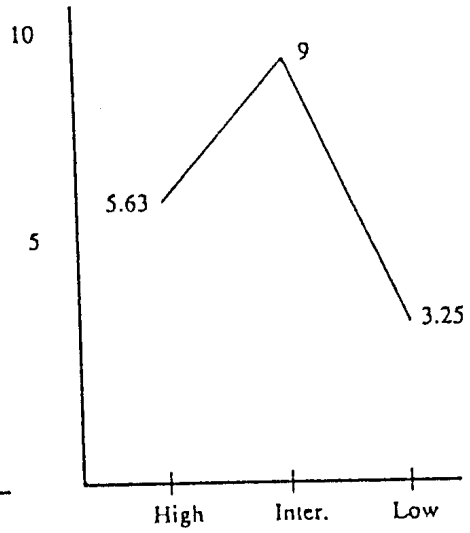

Figure 2 Total Interactions per Subject

These findings may seem surprising, but there are several factors that can explain them, particularly the intermediate group's greater production of words. Among all the factors affecting group dynamics (e.g. the presence of good leadership and member familiarity), the oral proficiency level of the group appears to be crucial. Intermediate learners have adequate oral skill for communication, yet need a variety of strategies to compensate for their lower proficiency. One such strategy is, as is evident in the group's high frequency of *communicative* interaction, the use of *clarifying* and *confirming*; in order to prevent communication breakdowns, they often checked what they heard before proceeding with their utterances. At first glance, low level learners could be expected to employ such strategies more often; however, their inadequate oral proficiency led to frequent message abandonment or code-switching, thus resulting in a minimal amount of speech production and interaction. Advanced learners, on the other hand,

did employ *clarifying* and *confirming*, but because of their higher oral proficiency, they did not require this strategy as much.

Similarly, other strategies such as paraphrases and the repetition of words also appeared to be employed by the intermediate group.[3] In fact, the intermediate learners in this study repeated words or phrases to emphasize their points (i.e., "That's right. That's right.") and also to facilitate the syntactic processing of ideas (i.e., "I think... the difficulty is is that which country do they need. To the difficulty is to decide. In deciding which country do they live ..." [learner's errors remain intact]). Further, they also used semantic rephrasing for words that did not come into their mind immediately (i.e., "my mother's mother" for "my grandmother"). The use of these strategies, together with *clarifying* and *confirming*, appear to promote the intermediate group's greater production of words.

4.2 Effects of Interlocutors

4.2.1 Same Level vs. Higher Level

As shown in Table 3, the main effect of interlocutor was significant for total turns (F =7.96, $p < .018$) and total c-units (F =5.64, $p < .039$) and also marginally significant for total words (F = 4.63, $p < .057$). For the other four measures, no significant effects were found. However, significant interaction effects were found between speaker and interlocutor for words/turn (F =6.53, $p < .029$) and marginally significant for words/c-unit (F =4.10, $p < .071$), S-nodes/c-unit (F = 4.61, $p < .057$) and R-words/100 words (F = 4.46, $p < .061$).

These findings indicate that interlocutors had confounding effects on the speech of learners at different oral proficiency levels. While the learners, both low and intermediate, similarly took more turns and produced more total words when talking to equal level speakers than when talking to higher level speakers, they showed a different tendency in using discourse units. In addressing advanced speakers, the intermediate learners talked more per turn and also per c-unit with slightly higher syntactic complexity; however, low

Table 3 Same vs. Higher: Means of Seven Measures

Measure	Low		Intermediate		F
	Same	Higher	Same	Higher	
Total turns	6.00	5.38	22.75	14.25	*
Total c-units	11.38	8.00	41.50	31.00	*
Total words	83.75	50.00	298.75	221.75	
Words/turn	12.34	8.15	9.92	18.46	+
Words/c-unit	7.05	5.56	5.33	7.77	
S-nodes/c-unit	1.14	0.97	0.77	1.26	
R-words/100 words	13.92	5.91	8.69	12.09	

Interlocutor effect F (df =1, 10) * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$
Interaction effect for speaker by proficiency level + $p < .05$

Table 4 Same vs. Higher: Means of Categories for Interaction

	Low		Intermediate		F
	Same	Higher	Same	Higher	
Total occurrence	3.25	1.13	9.50	5.00	
Communicative	2.13	1.13	6.25	2.00	*
[Clarifying	0.50	0.13	1.75	0.00	*
[Confirming	0.63	0.75	2.50	2.00	
Linguistic	0.00	0.13	3.00	2.50	
Social	1.13	0.00	0.25	0.10	

Interlocutor effect F (df =1, 10) * $p < .05$

level learners did the same in talking to equal level speakers. Likewise, in using redundant words for false starts and self-correction, both groups also showed this differing pattern.

For interaction (see Table 4), the main effects were marginally significant for total occurrences (F =4.68, p < .056) and significant for a major category, *communicative* (F =7.29, p < .022) and its subcategory, *clarifying* (F =5.84, p < .036). These findings indicate that the learners tend to interact more often with equal level learners than with higher level learners, especially in order to prevent communication breakdowns during conversation. For the other two major categories, *linguistic* and *social*, no significant effects were found.

The above findings suggest that the learners generally obtain more opportunities for production practice by talking to equal proficiency level learners than to higher level learners; however, the intermediate students benefit also from talking to advanced learners. First, let us explain why homogeneous grouping facilitated more speech production. The primary factor that is conducive to increased speech production may be psychologically equal status shared by group members. The learners, particularly those of the lower level, became reticent with higher proficiency partners; in fact, they spoke only 10 percent of the total utterances made by the groups when they were with these higher proficiency partners. This is in part due to their limited language, but more importantly, due to the fact that they would feel so inhibited by the fluency of advanced speakers that they could hardly speak in the target language. On the other hand, they tended to speak more with equal level partners, probably because this matching made them feel equal to other members, thus less threatened. In the homogeneous groups, the low level speakers nearly doubled their amount of speech (see total words in Table 3).

While low level speakers did not benefit much from talking to higher proficiency speakers in this study, those at an intermediate level seemed to enjoy more benefit. One possible factor to explain this finding is the oral proficiency level of the intermediate learners, which allowed them to take advantage of opportunities for

'comprehensible input' and 'comprehensible output' provided by advanced speakers. To illustrate this point, a segment of one conversation is presented below (S1 and S3, intermediate; S2, high):

S1: Er ... so in that case, what is a bad point? The change?
S2: Change of attitudes or the nature, bad nature of Japanese husband?
S3: No, no, no ... er ... *what is bad point is that he changed his attitude toward his wife.*

In this conversation, the intermediate learner (S3), challenged by the high learner(S2)'s response, expressed her opinion in a sentence where she incorporated the vocabulary ("change of attitudes") and structure ("what is a bad point") used by the previous two speakers.

As seen above, advanced speakers can provide opportunities for 'comprehensible output' by presenting seemingly more complex ideas and opinions, which push lower proficiency speakers toward the communication of more ideas. As a result, it sometimes necessitates the use of more complex structure and vocabulary on the part of these learners. In such cases, they resort to incorporating appropriate linguistic input in order to cope with the linguistic demand imposed on them. Thus, intermediate learners, unlike low level learners, seem more capable of stretching their speaking ability to express their intended meanings, and also capable of incorporating 'comprehensible input' into their own speech.

4.2.2 Same Level vs. Lower Level

As shown in Table 5, significant effects of *interlocutor* were found for total words (F =6.44, $p < .024$) and words/turn (F =18.13, $p < .001$) and words/c-unit (F =8.48, $p < .015$), and there were also marginally significant effects for total turns (F =3.95, $p < .075$) and R-words/100 words (F =4.67, $p < .056$). That is, learners (intermediate and high) produced more total words and redundant words and also used longer discourse units when addressing lower proficiency learners

Table 5 Same vs. Lower: Means of Seven Measures

Measure	High		Intermediate		
	Same	Lower	Same	Lower	*F*
Total turns	22.25	18.13	42.75	29.00	
Total c-units	39.00	38.88	68.50	66.50	
Total words	251.38	350.25	432.25	545.75	*
Words/turn	12.14	19.96	9.74	17.03	**
Words/c-unit	6.40	8.64	6.36	7.81	*
S-nodes/c-unit	1.05	1.24	1.03	1.17	
R-words/100 words	6.48	7.09	6.00	9.35	

Interlocutor effect F (df=1, 10) *p < .05, **p < .01

Table 6 Same vs. Lower: Means of Categories for Interaction

	High		Intermediate		
	Same	Lower	Same	Lower	*F*
Total occurrence	5.63	6.63	8.50	15.00	** +
Communicative	3.63	3.50	5.75	5.00	
Linguistic	1.38	1.63	0.75	4.00	* +
[Correcting	1.00	1.38	0.50	3.75	*
Social	0.63	1.50	2.00	6.00	*
[Soliciting turns	0.25	1.50	0.50	4.75	*

Interlocutor effect F (df=1, 10) *p < .05, **p < .01

Interaction effect for speaker by proficiency level +p < .05

than when addressing equal level learners. One factor that brought about this result is related to the higher frequency of interaction by these learners, especially through *soliciting turns* (F =9.68, p < .01 for total occurrences of interaction; F =8.74, p < .01 for *soliciting turns*,

see Table 6).

In dyads or small groups where learners of different proficiency levels are mixed, higher level learners tend to accommodate themselves to the level of their partners; they encourage lower level learners to take the floor by asking questions such as "What do you think of this idea?" or "Do you agree with me?" Like speakers who have been observed to use such accommodation strategies in both native/non-native and non-native/non-native conversation (Long 1981, Ross 1988), the higher proficiency learners in this study employed these strategies frequently.

What contributed more to their greater output, however, was exclusive exchange between those learners themselves. Receiving little feedback from lower proficiency learners, they easily fell into talking with the partner who had better communicative ability, and talked mostly to this partner, leaving the other two in a spectator position. Thus, in a heterogeneous group with two pairs at distinctly different proficiency levels, two subgroups are easily formed, which usually brings unbalanced turn-taking to its members. However, this tendency is less likely to occur in heterogeneous grouping where the levels of members are rather close to each other, as in the case of mixed grouping of intermediate and high level learners.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has sought to examine how learners' proficiency levels affect their speech production and interaction and also to investigate the effects of interlocutor proficiency level on learners' speech performance. Regarding the first question, the study found that the amount of speech production corresponds to the frequency of interaction; however, these two do not necessarily correlate with learners' oral proficiency levels. It seems that less proficient learners produce more words than highly proficient learners in order to compensate for their lack of full linguistic competence.

With regard to the second question, the study found that interlocutor proficiency level has effects on learners' speech production and interaction. It has been shown that learners of higher proficiency levels (advanced and intermediate) gain benefits in grouping with those of lower levels, where they obtain opportunities for the production of longer and syntactically more complicated utterances. In groupings with higher level learners, however, lower level learners (intermediate and low) are affected differently; whereas the intermediate learners benefit from this mixed grouping (i.e., syntactically more complex and longer statements produced per turn), low proficiency learners are inclined to make fewer utterances. We can, therefore, conclude from the perspective of 'comprehensible output' that it is higher proficiency learners that benefit from grouping with lower learners, whereas mixed grouping remains problematic for learners of the *lowest* level.

In terms of pedagogical concerns, the study has dealt with data gathered from group work of four participants. Just as Long points out the strengths and weaknesses of a larger group size (1977), this study found both positive and negative effects of group work. As one example of "problems of intra-group organization and communication" (1977:289), it was observed that linguistically competent learners are prone to dominate the discussion, especially in grouping with linguistically weak learners. However, it should also be noted that a group can provide more intellectual stimulus and more linguistic input. As found in this study, learners, stimulated by other learners' utterances, may attempt to push themselves toward the communication of their intended meaning. In this attempt, linguistic input offered by other members is likely to facilitate the speaker's syntactic processing of ideas into the target language. Thus, a group, when used for a discussion task, could offer more challenging opportunities for 'comprehensible output' on both cognitive and linguistic levels.

Lastly, considering the limitations of a small sample size, it is suggested that the findings of this study be confirmed in a larger sample study.

NOTES

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2 It should be noted that while studies on conversational adjustments look at limited interaction such as confirmation checks, comprehension checks, clarification requests and repairs (self and other-corrections), the present study attempts to analyze the nature of interaction from a wider perspective.

3 In second language writing, less proficient writers are observed to employ compensatory strategies to write effectively "at a time when they have not yet mastered the composing skills of more proficient writers" (Scarcella 1984:681). Therefore, it is quite likely that less orally proficient EFL learners would apply the same strategies in oral production.

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APPENDIX (Oral Test)

The oral test in the present research was developed by the researchers for this study. Interviews were conducted by the two researchers with each student individually. Students' performance was evaluated on a 1 to 5 point scale regarding six criteria: accuracy, comprehension, pronunciation, form, fluency, and production, with a maximum score of 60. Interrater reliability = 0.86 for the 2 raters.

The test consisted of three parts: (1) warm-up questions about learners, such as "Do you do any extra-curricular activities?"; (2) a picture description in which learners were asked to describe 8 sequenced pictures about a working student's day, and (3) elicitation of opinions about a given topic, e.g. "What do you think of the fact that many college students work part-time and sometimes forget about studying?" Each interview took about ten minutes.