

Modified Output in Iranian Efl Learners' Task-Based Dyadic Interactions Across Gender

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Abstract: The current study examined the modification devices used by non-native students (NNSs) during dyadic task-based interactions. Three meaning-oriented tasks, namely picture-description, spot-the-difference, and opinion-exchange were used to collect data from 24 intermediate proficiency Iranian EFL speakers, 12 male and 12 female, forming 3 male-male, 3 female-female, and 3 male-female dyads. All interactions were video-taped and transcribed. For the sake of systematicity, just the first 150 sentences of transcribed data were analyzed to assess the relationship among interlocutor type and the usage of different types of modification devices. The findings revealed that confirmation check was mainly used by both genders. The results demonstrated that clarification check was the most frequently used strategy for negotiation among the students. Data from this study propose that these modification devices facilitate comprehension of input and output and enhance the negotiation for both meaning and form. Language learners in this study seemed to get involved in exchanging ideas rather than trying to correct linguistic mistakes.

Key words: Modified output • Task-based language teaching • Dyadic interactions • Gender • Iranian EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades the second language research was mainly influenced by the theories proposed for describing the nature of learning and the factors involved in the process of learning. According to [1] language learning is simulated by communicative pressure that one of its important requirements is 'input'. The precursors of such studies on input are those which define it as auditory or visual linguistic environment that the learner is exposed to [2-4] or in other words, the available target language [5].

Input can be described as one of the conditions necessary for creating optimal linguistic environment for language learning to occur in ESL/EFL contexts. Input is the prerequisite of interaction and one of its roles can be its importance in fostering meaningful communicative use in appropriate contexts, but what is the appropriate context? Appropriate context that is an idea based on linguistic considerations rests on the argument that provision of sufficient input is prerequisite for language learning [6]. According to Krashen's input hypothesis [7],

a person can learn language when he is exposed to linguistic input that is comprehensible to him. A message will be intelligible when it is slightly above the level of immediate comprehension of the learner and is referred to as *i (interlanguage) +1*. In other words, the exposed language should be just far enough beyond his current competence that he can understand most of it but still remains challenged to make progress. Based on this hypothesis, the most important assumption is that speaking should not be taught in classroom or early stages of language development, because it emerges once a language learner has built up sufficient amount of I+1 [7].

Despite its significant influence on second language studies, this hypothesis has been widely criticized for its lack of supportive evidence by those believing that a learner's exposure to the target language is not in itself a sufficient condition for second language acquisition [8-12].

The opponents of this hypothesis believed that his hypothesis ignores the actual values of mental processes which are helpful for gleaning linguistic information

that is present inside the input and are obtained by different mental processes such as feedback and interaction [13].

The Interaction Hypothesis of Long [14], which was evolved out of criticism of Krashen's input hypothesis, is one of the models characterizing the nature of second language learning through interaction. He argued that negative feedback obtained during negotiation of meaning contributes to acquisition. That is to say it is highly unlikely if not possible for the learners to acquire second language communicative competence without engaging in meaningful interaction [15]. He emphasizes the role of input as a factor providing samples of positive evidence (by means of requests for clarification or confirmation checks) of how the language system works since their involvement in interaction provides the interactionally modified input for them and thus they can comprehend the input and focus their attention on new or partially learned vocabulary items and language structures which in turn enables their acquisition.

However, Long [16] in his later developed hypothesis recognized that "meaning negotiation can induce learners to modify their own output and this, too, may promote acquisition" [17], p. 286; therefore, any negative feedback, explicit or implicit, including *recasts*, can provide learners with necessary information they need to notice the gap between their own output and the native-like language forms.

Long's work directed the focus toward Swain's seminal work [11] in which she emphasizes the importance of dialogues as joint or inter-personal activities which enable learners to verbalize their target language knowledge and argues that the success in a foreign language cannot be attributed to comprehensible input alone and for non-native speakers having opportunities to produce comprehensible output are also necessary.

As mentioned before, noticing can take place by consciousness-raising activities of the teacher to help students notice specific language features or forms [14] or when learners, in the process of generating output, get to know that they do not know how to express their intended meaning. But when interlocutors ignore a source of problem [18], the breakdown in comprehension or communication cannot be detected and as a result, the learner who has made a mistake cannot notice the gap between his output and the TL output. In other words, negative feedback on unclear ideas pushes the learner to reformulate the incomprehensible messages by trying out new structures. Thus, "pushed output may assist the learner in acquiring L2" [19], p. 276.

In any educational setting, learners may encounter different linguistic environments depending on interlocutor type [20], and it is important for teachers to consider that the value of participation in interaction may depend to some degree on learner type. Knowing this point is beneficial to learners and teachers as well as researchers.

Moreover, this study can make it possible for teachers to capture the commonly used modification strategies used by their students. Students themselves may also benefit from recognizing the types of modification devices (MD) such as comprehension check, self correction and topic shift that they use while interacting with their interlocutors so that they can adjust their use of MD with the needs of community in which they are interacting.

Despite the fact that various studies investigated the use of interactional moves in interactions of learners and all of them proved that the use of MD have different advantages such as increasing syntactization, improving accuracy and also pronunciation [21] in the interactions of natives with natives [22] or non-natives and also the interactions of non-natives with non-natives (e.g., [19, 23, 24], they were merely examined to see whether learners are able to provide some linguistic feedback to other learners; few have touched on the relationship between the gender of partners in a dyad or pair and types of MD (or feedback moves).

On the basis of the identified gaps, the following research question, having discussed briefly in advance, was stated and is elaborated in this section. Thus the present study aims at determining the possibility of existence of any significant difference between male and female EFL learners' use of MD during dyadic task-based interactions, and the following research question has been formulated to meet this objective: *Is there any significant difference between male and female EFL learners in their use of modification devices during dyadic task-based interactions?*

MATERIALS and METHODS

The participants of the present study were 12 male and 12 female Iranian students. They shared the same linguistic and cultural background, that is, they all spoke Turkish as their first language and were quite fluent in Persian as the Iranian official language. These participants were learning English at Urmia University's language center, who were in the intermediate phase of language learning in that institute. The logic behind the decision

about selecting students with intermediate level of proficiency was that such students have acceptable command of English to perform the tasks required for the completion of the study because they are able to understand and use language to meet survival needs and routine social demands [19].

To collect data, the researcher used three communicative tasks adapted from similar studies on L2 development [18, 21, 22] in a counterbalanced order for 12 dyads participating in the study. The selected tasks included (a) spot the difference, (b) picture description and (c) opinion exchange tasks. Spot-the difference task required the interactants to find the differences in two variations of one picture while each of the participants was not able to look at the other participants' picture. To carry out the picture description task, one of the interlocutors had to draw a picture based on the descriptions of his partner whereas the picture was not shown to the person drawing it. Finally, in the opinion exchange task, both of the participants were given a text to read and give their opinions regarding the materials written and then try to give their own ideas. These tasks were used because they are considered to provide opportunities for interactional adjustments, such as clarifications of meanings, to occur.

In order to maintain systematicity transcriptions were only made of the first 150 utterances in each task. To distinguish utterance from other streams of language, the definition of [25] was used: according to them an utterance is "a stream of speech having at least one of the following characteristics: (a) under one intonation contour, (b) bounded by pauses, and (c) constituting a single semantic unit" [20]. The first 150 utterances were selected as the standard basis of transcriptions as each dyad produced at least 150 utterances for each task. The transcribed corpus of the present study consisted of 5400 utterances since each of the 12 dyads completed 3 tasks. Moreover, the transcribed utterances were double-checked by another trained person to maintain inter-rater reliability (Kappa Coefficient $K = .85$) regarding the consistency of (a) segmentation of utterances, and (b) utterance content.

Having transcribed the needed data, initial utterances were codified in different categories. The first step of categorization entailed identifying the *target-like* versus *non-target-like* utterances. Only non-target-like utterances were included in the analysis of this study as exploring the provision and nature of negative feedback were the goals of the present study.

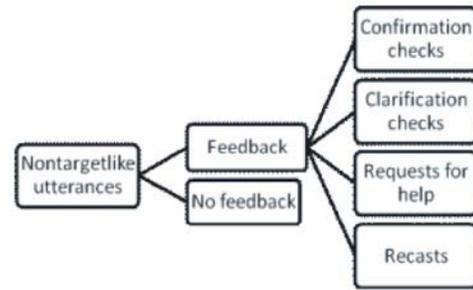


Fig. 1: Data categorization framework

Then, the response to non-target-like utterances were classified as if they provided negative feedback or not. Confirmation checks, clarification checks, requests for help, and recasts were all considered as negative feedback moves as they all alarm and warn the interlocutor about the incomprehensibility of their messages. While provision of negative feedback helps the interlocutors to modify their message production toward comprehensibility, it is not always the case that the conversation partners provide negative feedback; however, it can be observed that sometimes the interactants prefer to continue the conversation without trying to inform about the non-target-like nature of the original utterance. In the present study, such ignorance was classified as *no feedback*. In summary, the data analysis took place in the following steps.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The notion of modified output is defined as the output of the speaker which is modified by some notification made by the hearer originated from the incomprehensibility of the uttered message. This incomprehensibility may be because of grammatical errors, pronunciation mistakes or errors in semantic of that message. Whatever the reason of difficulty of understanding might be, interlocutors sometimes inform their partner by giving negative feedback so that the producer of the incomprehensible message may have the chance to correct or modify his utterance toward comprehensibility by noticing.

Negative Feedback: As stated earlier, the research question was concerned with whether there was any significant relationship between gender and production of specific MDs. First, the number of times interlocutors replied to learner nontargetlike utterances with negative feedback were tallied and then tabulated.

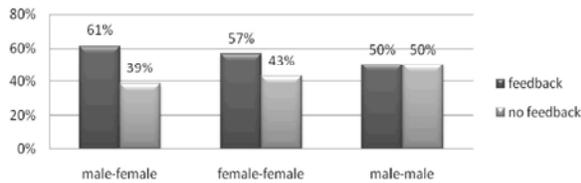


Fig. 2: Feedback provision.



Fig. 3: Feedbacks in 3 pairings.

Of the total number of nontargetlike utterances (N=502) identified, 276 (55%) received feedback while the remaining 226 (45 %) utterances did not receive any feedback. Figure 2 illustrates that generally there is a slight variation between feedback provision and lack of providing feedback.

In this vein, the following bar graph depicts the distribution of feedback in 2 pairings of male and female students (Figure 2).

As observed, the most feedback provision belongs to the male-female dyads (61%) whereas the least number of feedbacks (50%) was provided in male-male dyads, and the students in female-female dyads provided 57% feedback. However, of the total feedback provided, 105 instances (38%) belong to the male-male groups, 101 (37%) is for female-female pairs, and finally the least number which is 70(25%) belongs to male-female dyads (Figure 3).

Modification Devices: MDs or interactional moves play a major part in the interaction process as they are used by the interactants to signal the misunderstandings and incomprehensions that there are in the messages or utterances produced and by them the producer of the incomprehensible message gets to know that there is something wrong with his or her message. In other words, MDs serve two purposes: (1) for the hearer to signal the speaker about the nontargetlike nature of the message, and (2) for the producer to notice the gap between his utterance and the target language. Hence, in the present study second research question intended to investigate the existence of any significant difference between male

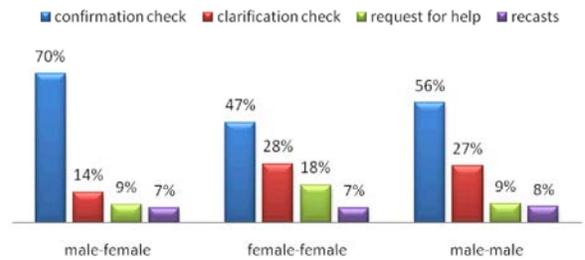


Fig. 4: Intra-group distribution of MDs.

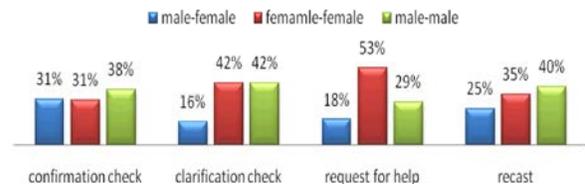


Fig. 5: Inter-group comparison of MDs.

and female EFL learners' use of MDs during dyadic task-based interactions. In so doing, the number of times that pairs had used four types of MDs, namely confirmation check, clarification check, request for help and recast, were counted and tallied (Table 2).

Based on Table 2 and the following chart (Figure 4), with an intra-group comparison it can be easily observed that the main type of modification device that was used by all the pairs is confirmation check as it was used in at least 47% of all instances.

Moreover, the inter-group comparisons as evident in Figure 5 revealed that the most share of confirmation checks and recasts belong to the male-male pairs, 38% and 40% respectively. The chart also demonstrated that both male-male and female-female dyads used clarification checks equally (42%) and more than male-female dyads (16%). Furthermore, it became clear that female-female dyads used requests for help (53%) more than others. However, the chi-square analyses showed that there was not any significant difference between male and female EFL learners' use of these MDs ($X^2 = 11.34$ ($6df, p > .05$)).

In this section, the findings of the study reported above will be justified in light of the previous similar studies carried out on MDs in the literature and also the researcher's own in-depth interpretations of the results will be elaborated based on both qualitative and quantitative data available. In this regard, the frequency, nature, characteristics and effectiveness of MDs are taken into account with a view of the findings of previous studies.

Table 1: Male and Female Students in Different Gender-Based Dyads: Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges

Interactional structure	Male-Female		Female-Female		Male-Male	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Feedback	5.83	1.992 (3-12)	8.42	3.753 (3-14)	8.58	5.728 (1-18)
No feedback	3.67	2.674 (0-9)	6.42	4.481 (1-16)	8.75	6.181 (2-19)

Table 2: Interactional Moves Used by Male-Female, Female-Female, and Male-Male Dyads

Interactional moves	Interactional structure			
	Male-Female	Female-Female	Male-Male	Total
Confirmation check	49	48	59	156
Clarification check	10	28	28	66
Request for help	6	18	10	34
Recast	5	7	8	20
Total	70	101	105	276

The Frequency of Negative Feedback: Negative or corrective feedback is considered as one of the salient features of conversational interaction by which the interlocutors detect the existing discrepancies in their output and try to resolve the communication breakdowns. Lyster and Ranta [26] believed that corrective feedback encourages self-repair involving accuracy and precision as well as comprehensibility. Lyster, Lightbown, and Spada [27] criticizing Truscott’s recommendations evidenced that “corrective feedback is pragmatically feasible, potentially effective, and, in some cases necessary” (p. 457). In support of such claims, Lyster’s arguments [28] can be taken into account; he argued that this type of feedback, or simply the act of signaling mismatches between target language production and nontargetlike production, facilitates peer- and self-repair. Moreover, [29] stated “that the awareness of the mismatch serves the function of triggering a modification of existing L2 knowledge, the results of which may show up at some later point in time” (p. 299).

One of the interesting results of the present study is that learners received negative feedback, regardless of their pairings, in response to a considerable number of their L2 nontargetlike utterances; a total of 276 (55%) nontargetlike utterances out of 502 received feedback. This is a bit more than the findings of Mackey *et al.* [20] that reported 209 (34.31%) feedback instances out of 609. But these results are closer to the findings of [30] who found that students in NNS-NNS dyads received 42% feedback regarding the rate of total nontargetlike utterances [30]. Although the developmental effects of

feedback were not investigated in the present study, the achieved results do show that participation in task-based interactions can even provide learners in NNS-NNS dyads with exposure to feedback in theoretically sufficient amounts, and they support claims regarding the importance of feedback as one of the benefits of interaction [16, 18, 31-33]. Moreover, empirical research [16, 34-36] suggested that NNS-NNS combinations tend to stimulate more negotiated interaction (through feedback) than NS-NNS dyads.

However, although all interlocutor types consistently provided negative feedback, male-female dyads provided the most number of feedback in response to the total number of non-target-like utterances in their own dyads. This is not in line with the findings of Rassaei and Tavakoli [37] who stated that error correction in same-gender dyads were superior to opposite-gender dyads.

Although these findings appear to be conflicting at first, it should be considered that the relationship between language and gender is mediated by the social activities and practices of those particular speech communities [38] and also by the different attitudes and learning conditions which are experienced by males and females [39]. This suggests that different second language behaviors of learners with different genders can be attributed to their social contextualization.

Modification Devices across Dyads: The main concern of this study was verifying the MDs (or negotiation moves) that learners of different genders provided in dyadic interactions of different pairings. Interestingly, it was revealed that of the four corrective feedback moves specified in this study (confirmation checks, clarification checks, requests for help, and recasts) 57% belongs to the confirmation checks. That is to say, out of total number of negative feedback moves tallied in the present study, confirmation checks allocate the biggest proportion to themselves while recasts occurred less than others. These outcomes can be justified by what [30] stated about the frequency of occurrence of recasts and other negotiation strategies in NNS-NNS interactions. She mentioned that rate of occurrence of recasts in NNS-NNS dyads was at least half of their occurrence in NS-NNS dyads perhaps because of the proficiency demands of these feedback forms. She also pointed out that the joint construction of meaning in order to defeat communication breakdowns requires negotiation strategies and lower levels of proficiency of NNS partners may be more conducive of this form of feedback.

In such a similar vein, [19] investigated the MDs that NNSs use during synchronous online exchanges. She got to know that Spanish students used request for help strategy more than clarification checks and clarification checks more than confirmation checks, 17%, 16%, and approximately 10%, respectively. The existing difference here may be attributed to the difference between computer-mediated interaction and face-to-face interactions since [40] and [41] reported higher frequencies of confirmation checks, clarification requests in face-to-face talk.

Furthermore, the results of the present study manifested that, except for request for help, male-male and female-female dyads used more confirmation checks, clarification checks, and recasts, and regarding request for help, female-female dyads provided the highest amount. These are in partial agreement with the findings of a dissertation study by [42] which showed that students in matched-gender dyads used more recasts than students in mixed-gender dyads. The study also revealed that females used more confirmation checks when working with males.

However, [43] proposed that the differing contexts of the research may account for these differences and the varying rates of uptake observed above. Dissimilar language backgrounds of the participants, varying language skill levels, differences in age, gender, motivation and cognitive abilities of the students, different task types, and dissimilar language settings, such as ESL, EFL, private or immersion contexts, may justify these diversities.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the findings demonstrated a high frequency of negative feedback to nontargetlike utterances occurred in the interactions of NNS-NNS dyads irrespective of the interlocutors' intermediate level of proficiency. Given the results observed in this study, it is important for researchers and teachers alike to know how to integrate dyadic interactions into the meaning-centered classrooms to promote meaning negotiation by increasing the degree of students-students interactions. Teachers can be encouraged to utilize more meaning-focused activities by raising their awareness of its potential advantages. Moreover, the overwhelmingly use of confirmation checks in interactions of intermediate students can be indicative of the fact that their level of proficiency is an influential factor determining their choices of using this particular type of modification device.

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