

## EFL PAIRWORK: ETHNOGRAPHIC AND NEO-VYGOTSKIAN PERSPECTIVES

Ruth Breeze  
University of Navarra

This study examines the talk generated by pairs of EFL learners in a classroom situation. First, ethnographic techniques are used to define the types of interaction taking place, and identify underlying genres or elements of procedural display which affect them. Secondly, evidence for peer help and «scaffolding» is discussed, as is the possible appropriation of inaccuracies. Finally, some implications for classroom practice are outlined.

### INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study was to investigate the kind of talk generated in pairwork sessions in the EFL classroom, on the basis of recordings conducted in the classroom from day to day.

The present study addresses two sets of questions. First of all, what light is shed on this kind of talk if we apply techniques proper to the ethnography of communication? In particular, what kinds of talk are being generated by pairs of learners? What factors influence the success of the interaction, and what underlying genres or forms of procedural display affect it?

Secondly, in a neo-Vygotskian perspective, what evidence of learning, help and peer «scaffolding» is there in these exchanges? To what extent do pairs correct each other or replicate each other's mistakes?

Finally, after attempting to answer these questions, I draw some practical conclusions for the language classroom and point out some directions for future research.

### RATIONALE

Current EFL methodology advocates plentiful use of «communicative activities» in which non-native speakers converse with each other with a minimum degree of supervision. The thinking behind this is partly of a practical nature, as this approach ensures a longer speaking time for each student, especially in large classes. But the theoretical claims made for pairwork extend beyond this: pairwork «frees the activity from dependence on the teacher» and when this takes place «the language has become increasingly embedded in a context of social interaction» (Littlewood 1981). There is an implicit assumption that once the constricting teacher-pupil frame is removed, «natural», «spontaneous» pupil-pupil conversation is automatically generated.

The functionalist approach of much EFL research in this area has meant that investigation of NNS talk has focused on the extent to which students pick up errors from each other, and the «effects of a steady diet of interlanguage» (Pica 1994) on accuracy and comprehension. Yet this is only part of the picture. There is an obvious need for open-ended study both of the ethnography of this special kind of speech situation, and of the ways in

which this kind of talk —albeit often interlanguage talk— reflects and embodies language learning. It is these two, ultimately converging, issues which are my main concern here.

First, then, let us consider NNS pairwork as a speech situation with its own norms and constraints (Hymes 1977). Such speech events are naturally influenced by the participants, topic, function and setting (Holmes 1992). In this study, the setting was always the same, and the only major sociolinguistic difference between participants was gender, as the age, status, educational, ethnic and linguistic background of all the students were roughly the same. For this reason, a tentative quantitative investigation of length of turn was conducted to see whether gender had a significant influence on the type of interaction. However, given the small number of subjects (four women and nine men), it would obviously not be possible to draw any general conclusions from such a comparison, or to make this the principal focus of the study. In fact, the pattern revealed by this quantitative analysis was influenced by factors quite other than gender.

A more central concern was to investigate what kind of talk was being produced, which in Holmes's terms would be a product of topic and function. This kind of speaking activity is notoriously open, but ethnographic studies have shown that most kinds of talk do fall into categories. Fisher (1994) explores some of the distinctive features of pupil-pupil talk in the classroom, and describes three particular kinds, cumulative text talk, exploratory talk and disputational talk, which have differing merit as vehicles for learning. This is brought to bear on the transcripts in this study, and an attempt is made to categorise the kinds of talk found, as a possible key to why some interactions are more successful than others. Ideas from Maybin (1994) about the construction of meaning through dialogue are also applied in order to assess what kind of communication is taking place in each exchange.

A further feature which was not envisaged, but which emerged as being of some significance, was the possible presence of underlying notions of genre, or ritual and procedural display (Bloome 1992, Edwards and Mercer 1987). Manifestations of this are described and discussed.

The second aim, to investigate how talk in EFL pairwork reflects and embodies language learning, has its background in Vygotskian theory (Mercer 1994, Vygotsky 1968, Cazden 1994). According to Vygotsky, the internal development processes awakened by learning can operate «only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers». Although much neo-Vygotskian research looks on language as a key to the processes of thought, the language classroom offers the interesting possibility that language is both vehicle and object of learning, and that students tend to be working within the zone of proximal (linguistic) development in a very concrete sense. It should thus be possible to track the progress made within the social context in which it occurs, as well as to identify factors which help or hinder it (see Maybin 1994). The specific questions addressed in this study are: whether students appear to offer each other help, «scaffolding» or correction; whether they appropriate from each other in a positive sense or actually pick up each other's errors; and whether there is otherwise evidence of learning, such as through «repairs» and the struggle to find expression. The particular role of code-switching (Mayor 1994) is investigated in this context.

#### SUBJECTS AND METHODS

This study was carried out between March and May 1997. The subjects were law and economics students aged 20-23 (four women and nine men) in the same intermediate-level group. All the students were studying English in the second semester for credits as part of their degree course, and all subsequently passed the final examination. All were native

speakers of Spanish. Recordings were made of eight five-minute exchanges between random pairs of students, and full transcripts were made.

Students had been told that the recordings would be used for research, and all the members of the class had consented to being recorded. The actual recordings were made during normal class time, by the class teacher, in the «communication activity» slot. The two students to be recorded were asked to sit slightly apart from the rest of the class, in order to improve sound quality. Otherwise, the students being recorded did exactly the same as the rest of the class. The «communication activity» in each case was based on some kind of visual stimulus, a photograph, sketch or diagram, accompanied by some sentences intended as prompts. In general, the attitude towards the study was positive, and students felt at ease with the cassette recorder. On one occasion, a student actually switched off the apparatus while it was recording in order to give encouragement to her shy speaking partner. However, Labov's paradox that observation itself alters what is being observed should not be ignored. In this case, I felt that the presence of the recording apparatus probably did mean that students made a greater effort to express themselves only in English than might normally be the case, but that it did not affect their communication strategies and habits in any more thorough-going way.

All the students were interviewed towards the end of the study. Informal interviews with colleagues were also held. Semi-structured observation notes were made about the circumstances of each recording, and about other pairwork sessions held in classes at this level.

For the purposes of the first part of the study (ethnography of communication), analysis of the transcripts was mainly qualitative, based on reading and re-reading. An ongoing list was made of interaction types, and each transcript was classified as having features of one or more types of interaction. Particular attention was paid to instances that seemed to show some kind of procedural/ritual display.

Quantitative methods were applied to determine the average length of turn (by number of words), in order to facilitate comparison.

As far as the second part of the study was concerned (help and learning), special attention was paid to the way in which one turn built on another and to any linguistic appropriation that took place. Examples of jointly constructed utterances were singled out for analysis.

Instances of conscious «help» were identified and scrutinised, as were cases in which students seemed to be asking their partner for help. All cases of code switching were identified and examined to see whether this phenomenon fulfilled any particular function in these interactions. Examples of repair and self-correction were also studied, and any partner response noted.

## RESULTS

The present study was designed to address two different orders of question. What kind of talk is being generated? And what insights can this talk give us into language learning?

### *1. The kind of talk that is being generated*

#### *A. Competitive, cumulative and communicative talk*

Fisher (1994) found that the task-based interactions she studied tended to fall into the categories of «cumulative text talk», «disputational talk» and «exploratory talk», the last

of which was the most profitable vehicle for learning. The looser nature of the talk in the present study meant that some adjustment had to be made to these categories to fit the data. The descriptions «cumulative talk», «competitive talk» and «communicative talk» were used (see Appendix A for definitions, Appendix B for a complete list). Of the eight interactions, three (Fernando-Miguel Angel, Luis-Javier M., Giuseppe-Mariana) were heavily competitive, but with cumulative elements: the desire to seize and hold the floor seemed to outweigh the inclination to listen to the partner, and interruptions were frequent. In one case (Giuseppe-Mariana) the interaction petered out before the five minutes were over, seemingly because real communication was not taking place. Of the other interactions, one (Javier M.-Manuel) was communicative with competitive elements; one (Eva-Francisco) was communicative with cumulative elements; and three (Eva-Mariana, Marta-Ignacio, Cristina-Javier) were chiefly communicative.

It is interesting to note that the communicative/competitive interaction (Javier M.-Manuel) was perhaps the most polished formal performance (see below): the speakers communicated well, listened to each other, and demolished each other's arguments without interruptions or abrupt changes of direction. The success of the interaction may also be due to the fact that the subject these speakers embarked on was a real issue that the picture sparked off. The four interactions with cumulative elements were all characterised by sudden changes of subject and a sense that statements were being made without regard to what had just been said. It is interesting to see that in the three of these that were also competitive, this seems to have been a feature of the desire to hold the floor at all costs, while in the other, the reason why unconnected sentences were produced seems to have been the opposite: a desire not to speak unless absolutely necessary, resulting in a disengaged searching around for something to say after a substantial pause. This would seem to flaunt the laws of conversation implicit in the work of Schegloff and Sacks (Coulthard 1985), in which the speakers are concerned to gain and hold the floor and to control any change of speaker. The type of conversation in which neither participant has much desire to speak—only too typical of the EFL classroom—could form the subject of a separate investigation.

#### *B. Length of turn: balance, gender, formality of interaction*

A further feature of interest was the type of utterance and turn produced, the degree of formality this seemed to indicate, and the balance between the two speakers in each case. Appendix B shows the average number of words per turn for each participant in each interaction. It is particularly interesting that in the exchanges that had previously been classified as communicative, the length of turn seems to be very evenly balanced between partners. The more competitive interactions had a greater imbalance of turn length. The length of turn shows no correlation with gender. In fact, it is curious to note that the length of turn appears to be a function of the interaction, not the individual student. The three students (Eva, Mariana and Javier M.) who appear twice had very different lengths of turn in the different conversations in which they participated. Although it is impossible to generalise from these data, they point to length of turn being subject to the general law of linguistic accommodation by which cooperative speakers negotiate common ground for communication.

The length of turn is also important because some testing scales assume that a competent student should be producing several connected utterances (which would amount to a turn length of 30+ words). Here, some of the most cooperative and evenly balanced interactions had turn lengths of 10-20 words. It is probable that students will only produce

longer turns if they perceive that the formality of the situation requires this, and if the speaking partner is also willing to produce such turns.

Finally, the kind of turn produced calls into question the possibility of jointly constructed utterances. In general, the turn-taking in these interactions follows the «no gap, no overlap» model often taken as normative in English. However, there were some instances of jointly constructed turns which follow the pattern described by Coates (1994) as being characteristically female, but which Aznárez (unpublished) has shown to be common among Spanish speakers in all-male and all-female conversations alike. This feature is particularly common in the interaction between two women (Eva/Mariana), which contains examples such as the following:

*Eva* and when the weather is very good for example it's better  
*Mariana* they think the god is  
*Eva* yes is happy  
*Mariana* is happy

The highly competitive interaction between Fernando and Miguel Angel, on the other hand, produces patterns like this:

*MA* I think in ten years the the  
*Fernando* Well actually we already in the European Community but I think  
*MA* There will be er more progress in the Union  
*Fernando* For example in money you  
*MA* In money  
*Fernando* We are going to use the Euro and  
*MA* Yes next year but  
*Fernando* Next year? The Euro?

The impression is somewhat disjointed: the turns do not follow on properly from each other, perhaps owing to the competitive style in which each speaker tries both to push forward his own line of argument and query what the other has said.

In general, however, neither type of exchange is typical. Further study would be needed to make claims for one turn-taking pattern being particularly «male» or «female».

Under this heading, we should also note that a certain kind of «joint construction» is a specific feature of NNS talk, as it is a way in which one partner supplements the linguistic skills of the other. We shall examine this in the section on peer help, below.

### *C. Procedural display, or the ghost of genre?*

One factor which emerged from the data as being of particular interest was the question of the students' underlying notions of what such an interaction was supposed to be about. These notions fell into two genre-related categories: control (the ghost of the teacher/examiner); and what could loosely be described as a formulaic approach (picture-describing formulae, and the «it reminds me» escape route). In two cases (Eva-Mariana, Giuseppe-Mariana), one speaker took complete charge of the interaction, in one case by asking all the questions, in the other by speaking nearly all the time. In two cases (Fernando-Miguel Angel, Luis-Javier M.), however, a definite power struggle was taking place: both speakers aspired to the dominant role, and adopted an aggressive «interrogation» style that might reflect their expectations of what an oral examination in English would

hold in store. The most marked case of this was that of Luis and Javier M., who barked out questions on non-essential aspects of the photograph («Is the window on the right or the left?») and staked out commanding examiner-like roles for themselves («Now we are going to talk about the second photograph»).

The second phenomenon, which could be described kindly as a search for genre or critically as a relapse into ritualised responses, could be detected in three of the interactions (Eva-Mariana, Luis-Javier M., Eva-Francisco). It took two forms, the first being the phrase «it reminds me of...» which is commonly taught as a way of escaping from a difficult picture or subject. The second was an over-emphasis on the minutiae of the photograph («On the wall there is a picture but we can't see it we can see only the mark»), which teachers usually tell students to avoid at all costs. It is interesting to see that this mechanical approach to picture-based tasks persists: this suggests that some students need formulaic methods for «dealing with» a picture, perhaps because the exercise itself is an artificial one which evokes no genuine interest or response, or because they have not been taught simply to use the picture as a stimulus for «normal» conversation. The procedural display involved in dissecting a picture into top-right-hand corners, etc., at least gives an impression that conversation is being generated.

## II. Talk and learning

### A. Peer help and «scaffolding»

One obvious way in which NNS help each other in speaking activities is by supplying words or phrases that the partner seems to need. The resulting «joint» utterance can be distinguished from the kind of joint utterance described above by the fact that it is created to plug some linguistic gap. Obvious examples of this occurring are:

*Eva* ... is the house of the dios

*Mariana* god

*Eva* god, yes, and when the weather is bad ...

and

*Javier M.* he's quite well dressed with em suitcase and he wears a

*Luis* tie

*Javier M.* tie (.) black and white with straight em ...

This seems to be linked to the phenomenon of code switching: the few occasions on which these subjects used Spanish were either as a transferred habit of speech (saying «sí», «¿yo qué sé?» or «er, bueno»), or when they obviously did not remember the English word («it is true they are a good *pareja* Alice and Donald, no?»). This latter feature runs counter to Gumperz's rules for bilingual code-switching («only in relatively few [cases] is code alternation motivated by speakers' inability to find words to express what they want to say in one or the other code») (Mayor 1994), but it is to be expected that NNS speech will follow different norms from the speech of bilingual people, and there will be greater reliance on the native language to plug gaps in target language vocabulary.

### B. Repairs, correction and appropriation

The issue of repairs and correction is linked to a question which has been widely, though unconvincingly, researched (Pica 1994), and which, as interviews with students and colleagues showed, is still a cause of concern for teachers and pupils alike. Do EFL

students correct and learn from each other, or do they in fact pick up each others' mistakes? Do they correct themselves and thereby improve their own command? Seen in a Vygotskian perspective, this is the area in which the zone of proximal (linguistic) development is most palpable.

First, it was striking that on a number of occasions one speaker started to flounder, and his/her partner responded to what he/she had been trying to say without any attempt at correcting the phrase used. For example:

*Marta* ... living in the countryside is very bore boring no bored  
*Ignacio* You think so?

or:

*Eva* Ah in the night for example in this picture what can you or what do you can what?  
*Mariana* Perhaps there might be parties...

In fact, in this set of transcripts no actual instance of peer correction or intentional «scaffolding» could be identified. The feature which came closest to this was the request for clarification, either because of poor pronunciation on the speaker's part, or poor comprehension on the listener's. The following examples illustrate this:

*Mariana* ... because they have a mane  
*Eva* Mane no?  
*Mariana* Yes

and:

*Ignacio* For example in Spain in the part of Galicia  
*Marta* The?  
*Ignacio* The region of Galicia

On the other hand, students often corrected themselves: this can be seen in attempted repairs such as «you can have *spend* nice time», «and very good for blind man for blind *people*», «he's buying no he's *selling*», «if I have *had* to drive it» or «an exposition a *show* of old cars». This shows that students are aware of their own mistakes and are concerned to be accurate, at the expense of fluency, even though they do not point out their partner's errors. One student (Marta) even commented when interviewed that she thought pairwork was useful because «you notice the mistakes and try not to do those mistakes»: presumably some underlying convention of politeness or equality was preventing these students from actually correcting each other.

As far as appropriation of mistakes was concerned, the transcripts in this study were found to contain some evidence of this happening. This was most obvious in cases in which a wrong word was supplied:

*Mariana* It should it be the Bahamas  
*Eva* Caribe  
*Mariana* Caribe  
*Eva* Caribe is better no?

or:

*Manuel* ... in state universities you pay the bill  
*Javier M.* Tax  
*Manuel* The tax and and in the private you pay the tax and that's all...

A more insidious form of error appropriation seems to be present in the following example:

*Eva ... can be belong for by tourist no? why not?*

*Francisco Yeh or () can be rent for tourist*

The incorrect «for» to indicate the agent («por» in Spanish), is first used by Eva, who corrects it, but it is then picked up again by Francisco (on transfer errors see Littlewood 1984).

However, it should be stressed that such examples are not very common, and that they need to be seen in the context of the need for students to practise speaking English. The main form of «scaffolding» here is the constant stimulus of peer group conversation, which leads students to generate fresh utterances, use new words and structures, and integrate their subskills, stretching their knowledge of English further as they seek expression. This brings us full circle to the question of the type of interaction and turn-taking that is occurring: cooperative conversation and balanced turns promote learning; a competitive approach may also provide stimuli for the partner; but the cumulative type of interaction in which partners seem not to be engaging in much real communication offers little interactive stimulus for the learning process.

## DISCUSSION

This study provides an insight into what is actually happening in pairwork in the EFL classroom. Three different types of possible interaction are defined, and two different forms of procedural display are identified. On the basis of this, it would be interesting to make students aware of the pitfalls of cumulative and over-competitive interactions, and guide them away from procedural displays of the kind discussed towards more natural, constructive communication techniques.

A second point with relation to this is that the very concept of a loosely picture-based communication exercise is open to question: some students' reliance on mechanical picture description and random cumulative remarks may be due to the artificial nature of the exercise. A study comparing student performance in the various different kinds of communication activity in use (argument, decision-making, prediction, etc.) might shed light on the type of tasks that are most conducive to learning and practice.

The finding that in cooperative interactions the partners' turns were of similar length, and that this was a function of the interaction, not the individual speaker, is interesting as a further aspect of the general theory of accommodation. This could be tested over a larger sample of students. It would also be interesting to compare the recordings of these students in class with those made during their end-of-term examination, with regard to formality, length of turn, balance and type of interaction, perhaps bearing in mind the criteria used in marking oral examinations at this level. If turn length is truly a product of negotiation between the two speakers, then marking criteria which take it for granted that every competent speaker will produce several extended, interconnected utterances should be called into question.

Regarding evidence of the learning process, the students in this study a) often supply words for each other but rarely correct each other, b) often correct themselves, and c) sometimes appropriate errors from each other. It would be interesting to know whether a) holds for students in other cultures, and whether it might change were the students made more aware of their role in helping each other to learn.

Taken as a whole, this exploratory study provides insights into several aspects of pair-work. It would be interesting to follow it up by looking at the interactions between other types of student, and between students who do not know each other, to gain a fuller picture of the types of strategy employed and the nature of peer help and lapses into procedural display.

## APPENDIX A

### 1. *Competitive talk*

This is characterised by challenges, interruptions and a desire to dominate the interaction on the part of one or both partners. In this example, Miguel Angel contradicts Fernando, but is ignored. It is more of an argument than a discussion, and even an attempt at compromise («As Germany for example») is dismissed.

<i>Fernando</i>	... we are going to be the same
<i>Miguel A.</i>	No higher
<i>Fernando</i>	The same have the same
<i>Miguel A.</i>	No higher
<i>Fernando</i>	As Germany for example or something
<i>Miguel A.</i>	I think higher
	I don't know about Germany but I ...

### 2. *Communicative talk*

This is talk in which partners really seem to be listening to each other and responding to what has been said. The mood is cooperative, and partners build on each others' utterances. In this case, Cristina is gently disagreeing with Javier's idea that the car is too expensive for a normal person to drive:

<i>Javier</i>	... if I have had to drive it I () be nervous because I can't I can make it a mark a crash to ()
<i>Cristina</i>	But don't you think that I don't think that it's too expensive because I think it moves with wind ...

### 3. *Cumulative talk*

This is talk in which remarks are accepted without discussion or comment. The effect is one of a number of unrelated utterances thrown together in random list form. Here, although Francisco is talking about the weather, Eva responds with a question about the location. Francisco persists a little with the subject of weather/season, but then jumps to a third subject, that of the population of the town in question.

<i>Francisco</i>	... if it were spring there would be more snow
<i>Eva</i>	Yes but I don't know which place in the Andes no?
<i>Francisco</i>	How the spring go (..)
<i>Francisco</i>	I think that these this city or the town have a lot of people ...

## APPENDIX B

These data show strong positive correlation between partners' turn lengths.

Average length of turn (in number of words)

Eva 10.95

Mariana 11.13

communicative

Luis 20.13

Javier M. 19.94

competitive/cumulative

Giuseppe 50.4

Mariana 7.5

competitive/cumulative

Eva 31.15

Francisco 23.08

communicative/cumulative

Marta 44

Ignacio 42.4

communicative

Cristina 24.44

Javier 22.1

communicative

Javier M. 83

Manuel 99

competitive/communicative

Fernando 18.54

Miguel A. 10.07

competitive/cumulative

Note: the average number of words per turn was calculated on the basis that a turn which continues over several attempted interruptions or supportive interjections should be counted as one turn only. Utterances of one to three words meant purely as supportive back-up to the partner's turn were not included as turns in this count.

## REFERENCES

- Aznárez, M. 1997: *Las mujeres en la interacción conversacional*. Unpublished dissertation for the M.A. in Hispanic Philology, Universidad de Navarra.
- Bloome, D. 1992: *Literacy and Schooling*. Norwood: Ablex Publishing Co.
- Cazden, C. 1994: Language, cognition and ESL literacy: Vygotsky and ESL literacy teaching. *TESOL Quarterly* 28.1: 172-176.
- Coates, J. 1994: Women's cooperative talk: A new kind of conversational duet? *Proceedings of the Anglistentag 1990*, Marburg. Ed. Uhlig and Zimmermann. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.
- Coulthard, M. 1985: *An introduction to discourse analysis*. Harlow: Longman.

- Edwards, D. and Mercer, N. 1987: *Common knowledge: the development of understanding in the classroom*. London: Methuen & Co.
- Fisher, E. 1994: Distinctive features of pupil-pupil classroom talk and their relationship to learning: how discursive exploitation might be encouraged. Ed. Stierer and Maybin. *Language, Literacy and Learning in Educational Practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Hammersley, M., Gomm, R. and Woods, P. 1994: *Educational Research Methods*. Milton Keynes: The Open University.
- Holmes, J. 1992: *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. London: Longman.
- Hymes, D. 1977: *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*. London: Tavistock.
- Littlewood, W. 1984: *Foreign and Second Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maybin, J. 1994: Children's voices: talk, knowledge and identity. *Researching Language and Literacy in Social Context*. Ed. Graddol, Maybin and Stierer. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Mayor, B. 1994: What does it mean to be bilingual? *Language, Literacy and Learning in Educational Practice*. Ed. Stierer and Maybin. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Mercer, N. 1994: Neo-Vygotskian theory and classroom education. *Language, Literacy and Learning in Educational Practice*. Ed. Stierer and Maybin. Clevedon, Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Pica, T. 1994: Questions from the language classroom: research perspectives. *TESOL Quarterly* 28.1: 49-80.
- Vygotsky, L. 1968: *Thought and Language*. Cambridge Mass: MIT Press.

