

Resum

Aquesta tesi presenta un estudi de cas que va investigar el potencial de l'Avaluació Dinàmica dins del marc de l'Ensenyament i Aprenentatge per Tasques com aproximació pedagògica amb l'objectiu de millorar la producció oral en un context de l'anglès com a llengua estrangera. L'element central del procediment pedagògic era l'augment de la consciència metalingüística i metacognitiva. En l'estudi van participar estudiants universitaris (N=30) de nivell intermedi-baix d'anglès acadèmic i professional de la Universitat Politècnica de València. Fent ús de constructes de teories socioculturals, es va dissenyar i es va dur a terme un tractament pedagògic de nou setmanes basat en els principis de l'Avaluació Dinàmica per aconseguir els següents objectius: a) investigar com evidenciar la consciència metalingüística mitjançant l'Avaluació Dinàmica; b) avaluar el valor d'aquest enfocament pedagògic en relació amb la producció oral dels participants; i c) investigar les idees i la percepció dels participants sobre diversos aspectes de l'Avaluació Dinàmica.

Basat en un disseny d'investigació pre-post, els resultats suggereixen que, encara que hi va haver diferències en les medicions, hi hagué una millora global en la producció oral dels participants. Les dades s'han analitzat des de la perspectiva de l'Avaluació Dinàmica com a mètode per a apropar-se al desenvolupament d'una segona llengua. La tesi proporciona una anàlisi de la dimensió metalingüística que va ser un aspecte integral del procediment de

l'Avaluació Dinàmica; els participants es van centrar en una gran varietat d'aspectes morfosintàctics, lèxics i discursius que reflecteixen les capacitats lingüístiques emergents dels estudiants. Per últim, la gran quantitat de dades arreplegades mitjançant una varietat d'instruments (tests, transcripcions de produccions orals gravades, entrevistes i qüestionaris), ens van permetre adquirir informació valuosa sobre les idees i percepcions dels participants respecte de l'Avaluació Dinàmica. La dissertació conclou amb la discussió de la viabilitat d'implementar l'Avaluació Dinàmica individual i grupal en un context d'aprenentatge d'una llengua estrangera i amb algunes implicacions pedagògiques de les nostres troballes.

Introduction

The development of oral proficiency in a second language has been widely researched. The present study draws on second language acquisition (SLA) research and sociocultural theory to inform a mixed-method empirical study to confirm claims that a task-based design relying on metalinguistic and metacognitive support through Dynamic Assessment (DA) is effective in promoting the development of second language oral proficiency in English as a foreign language (EFL).

The impetus for the investigation was our belief, based on years of teaching in a foreign language context, that there is still need for further research into additional and alternative ways to assist learners in overcoming the difficulties many of them experience as they attempt to develop their language skills in contexts marked by the absence of an authentic anglophone environment in which to use the language.

In order to improve performance in speaking, acquisition needs to take place. The learner needs to acquire the linguistic forms and structures, the lexical input, and the functional, pragmatic and strategic skills that he or she will then use with a communicative purpose in a particular setting and social environment. In a first language, this process takes place naturally and, although instructional support is also provided, the process of acquiring a native language benefits from access to multiple sources of target language data in authentic communicative situations, repeated opportunities for practice and, crucially, feedback from other speakers, which enables the language user to constantly refine and adjust their expression. In a foreign language context, pedagogical interventions are required to make up for learners' limited exposure to language in authentic contexts. These

constraints apply to the context in which the present study was carried out. In this research, the participants are in their third year of undergraduate study at the School of Building Engineering (ETSIE – Escuela Técnica Superior de Ingeniería de Edificación) of the Polytechnic University of Valencia (UPV - Universitat Politècnica de València). An additional challenge arises from the fact that the subjects in this study, adult undergraduate students in a technical university, do not form a homogeneous group, a frequent occurrence in the context of these classes. Particularly in the area of speaking, significant differences are to be found, depending on the different opportunities for practice each learner may have had, their language learning experience outside the classroom, their language ability, and the fact that these students have already been through diverse educational experiences and backgrounds, as is always the case with adult learners.

The study sets out to acknowledge these differences and to integrate the individual and the collective needs within the framework of a carefully designed syllabus informed by research on Task-Based Teaching and Learning and Dynamic Assessment understood from an interactionist perspective as a pedagogical approach which aims at actively mediating development while assessing learners and responding to their individual and/or collective needs. What is essential about this pedagogical practice is to keep in mind that at its core lies “the intersection of the individual and the collective, mediated by cultural tools” (Lund, 2008).

The oral language curriculum in the Spanish educational system has undergone important changes in recent years. Just as English has gained prominence around the world as a lingua franca, it increasingly permeates Spanish society and culture. Learners are more aware than ever that they need to be fluent in English if they wish to gain access to information and to communicate effectively

with people around the world. Students in English classrooms often comment that they would like to be able to speak English, among other things, so that they can travel to other countries, talk to people, do business and, to put it briefly, to be able to reach the global community. They know that they will stand a better chance of making themselves understood in a foreign country if they can speak some English. Likewise, they are aware that they will not be competitive in an increasingly knowledge-based society without a good command of English, as it is now the international language of business and commerce and also the language of science and technology. This means that countless business transactions, meetings, conferences, scholarly presentations and many other related activities taking place worldwide are conducted in English and participants are expected to display a good command of the spoken language.

Some of the problems Spanish students experience when they attempt to speak are derived from the limited oral input many of them received in their primary and secondary education, and the few opportunities they had to speak English for meaningful communication, both in and outside the classroom. We bring here a lucid analysis found in a teacher's forum of the British Council's online page. It is written by a native English teacher working in Spain and we believe it vividly illustrates what the situation has been until recently in this country regarding the teaching and learning of English:

(In Spain) Children are taught English all through their school years, but only very few come out with a real (spoken and written) B1 level, which is the aim of the Ministry of Education here. Most have to join extracurricular classes in other language schools or the British Council to notch this up to B2 or even C1. Of course, we're talking non-

bilingual schools here.

The reason behind this is sometimes the lack of exposure to authentic input in schools, the overemphasis on grammar and writing at the expense of speaking, listening or vocabulary and the resulting lack of motivation. Learners are sometimes faced with language which is above their actual level of competence and very little is done to remedy this situation as assessment is very much test-based.

This teacher goes on to offer his own advice as to what could be done to help students achieve success in the language, and hints at key factors negatively affecting the teaching and learning of English in Spain.

Input and oral practice to automatise this knowledge is paramount, and this sometimes conflicts with classroom management difficulties and lack of training opportunities for school teachers.

(Spoken English, British Council TeachingEnglish forum, 2011)

Things are beginning to change, as the educational authorities battle to bridge the gap by increasing the number of contact hours and re-orienting the way foreign languages are taught, notably, by introducing language programmes starting in primary education in which English is taught through Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approaches, i.e., those that involve using the language as a medium of instruction, or a combination of a content and language focus (See Lasagabaster & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010 for a review). It is hoped that such efforts will soon bear fruit and that the overall level of English, particularly spoken English, will rise for every student in university classrooms in Spain.

Another issue brought up by the teacher in the forum relates to what is described as a lack of training opportunities for teachers. In an analysis of the situation of English language teaching in tertiary education in Spain, Perry (2007),

highlights what we believe to be one reason behind this deficiency. It concerns the traditional focus that Spanish Higher Education establishments have placed on disseminating knowledge, rather than on teaching skills and knowing-how-to-do something. According to Perry, language departments in Spain have tended to offer courses “*about* the language and *about* the culture and peoples using the language, rather than general or specific communicative skills in the language itself” (p. 28). It is hardly surprising, then, that faced with the challenge of preparing students for real communication in their academic and professional activity, teachers have often missed the point. Watts and García-Carbonell (1999), express themselves along similar lines when they affirm that Spain has leaned towards the conventional side of methodology, which encourages “memorizing a great amount of information, neatly and artificially divided into different subjects or disciplines” and the ability to show success in examinations (p. 524).

The increasing demand for more effective and coordinated teaching practices at the tertiary level across Europe has been channelled through a series of reforms brought about under the framework of the Bologna Process (1998-present), of which Spain is one of the signatory members. The overarching aim of this large-scale effort has been the creation of the European Higher Education Area based on international cooperation and academic exchange. It involves a structural re-organisation of Higher Education aimed at enabling flexible student-centered learning itineraries and a focus on lifelong learning. One of its goals has been the development of easily readable and comparable grades with a view to facilitating student mobility across Europe and beyond. The European Credit Transfer System

(ECTS) is the basic tool that determines the student workload, preferably specified in terms of learning outcomes and competences to be acquired.

A project carried out by the DISCYT research group at Madrid Polytechnic University (UPM) has produced a bank of linguistic learning outcomes expressed in “can do” descriptors for future engineers that aims to reflect the new teaching and learning approaches and takes into account the specific academic and professional English for Specific Purposes (ESP) needs of engineering students. In particular, the development of communication skills has been identified in the course of this research as an essential goal in the new knowledge-based society, “as society not only realizes the importance of knowledge but also the importance of proper knowledge-sharing and distribution” (Pierce & Duran, 2008, p. 59). In the contemporary workplace, it is no longer enough to be competent in one’s own technical field. An engineer must be able to communicate effectively with their peers, supervisors, technical personnel and users. Hence, students need to be taught discipline-related as well as interpersonal communication skills.

As Pierce and Durán (p. 61) note, an outcomes-based curriculum emphasises the learner’s achievement rather than the teacher’s intentions. This represents a fundamental shift away from the traditional teacher-centered approaches to one that places the students at the core of the learning process and supports them in pursuing their own paths of development.

Research questions

To achieve the aim of promoting a more active engagement of learners in their own development, metalinguistic awareness is explored in the present study as an aid to the development of learners’ speaking skills within a task-based pedagogical design and Dynamic Assessment. In order to examine these dimensions, as well as

to investigate the pedagogical value of the procedure and the students' thoughts about it, a set of descriptive as well as objective measures is proposed. To this end, the following research questions are addressed:

RQ1: How is metalinguistic awareness evidenced in Dynamic Assessment?

RQ2: What is the effect of Dynamic Assessment on the participants' oral performance?

RQ3: What are participants' perceptions of Dynamic Assessment as implemented in this study?

As regards speaking, it is hypothesized that by engaging in a task-based pedagogical design focused on meaningful communicative oral activity followed by Dynamic Assessment, learners will develop a better understanding of what represents effective speaking in a foreign language, which will positively affect their interlanguage development.

Firstly, this thesis hypothesizes that undergraduate engineering students of English as a Foreign Language who engage in reflective exercises on their performance after communicative oral activity will show metalinguistic awareness through discerning and repairing their errors as well as identifying their accomplishments. Secondly, the effect of a cycle of tasks and reflection through Dynamic Assessment will result in improved oral performance. Thirdly, the students under study will perceive the task-based pedagogy and Dynamic Assessment strategies to be positive for learning English as a Foreign Language.

The remainder of the thesis is organised into five chapters plus this Introduction, in which we have so far briefly summarized the rationale for the thesis and will now present an overview of its contents. Chapter One provides the

theoretical basis for this research, which is set within the framework of Second Language Acquisition and a socio-constructivist approach to language learning and teaching, as described in Section 1. Section 2 focuses on the processes and representations that emerge as a second language (L2) is being developed. Intra- and extra-linguistic factors are also dealt with. In Section 3 we elaborate on aspects of second language learning, with attention to task-based teaching and sociocultural theory as it applies to pedagogy. Section 4 addresses second language assessment, seen first in its standardized applications (e.g., official examinations) and then from the perspective of its contribution to the processes of ongoing L2 acquisition and learning in the language classroom. Chapter Two deals with the skill of speaking. The criterial features of talk are described, as well as the various approaches to spoken language pedagogy and assessment. Chapter Three provides a full description of the context, the participants, the tasks, and the data collection and data analysis procedures carried out in this research. Chapter Four presents the results obtained and a discussion based on our interpretations on the basis of the assumptions made at the outset. In Chapter Five, the conclusions follow with proposals for future research. Finally, detailed Bibliography and Appendices sections are provided.

1. Second Language Teaching and Learning

A question most teachers have probably asked themselves at some point is whether their students will learn what they teach in their classes. Unfortunately, there is no measuring rod that can determine exactly what students will learn out of the content and the skills targeted by teachers in their courses. A learner's intentions, motivation and abilities, and the specific context in which a class takes place, among other things, will differentially affect the processes through which he or she acquires a second language. Drawing on mainstream Second Language Acquisition and sociocultural theory, this chapter summarizes the main arguments that seek to explain these phenomena, as they constitute the theoretical background to the pedagogical design described in this thesis.

1.1 Theories of second language acquisition

Over the course of the past forty years, the field of Second Language Acquisition has evolved as a discipline that aims to elucidate the processes learners go through as they attempt to acquire a language that is not their own, both in naturalistic and instructed contexts. In this section we will be focusing on these processes, particularly as regards the teaching and learning of English in a foreign language context. The present overview focuses, on the one hand, on L2 acquisition from the psycholinguistic perspective, and on the sociocultural theory of mind on the other. The former approach presents "a computational view of language acquisition" (Ellis, 2003, p. 113) with two distinct models for linguistic development:

- a. The connectionist models, which rely on general cognition to explain how the individual brain, in the absence of a dedicated area for language, engages in associative processes that lead to the development of a structured linguistic system.

- b. The nativist models, which claim that the human brain has a dedicated mental module equipped with a linguistic set of principles and parameters which are activated by the user for generating novel utterances.

The second theoretical perspective of our study stems from the sociocultural theory of mind to account for the processes involved in the development of human cognition in relation to learning in general and to second language acquisition in particular. In this view, language arises out of an ongoing process of cognitive restructuring which is culturally mediated.

Despite their different points of departure, both psycholinguistic and sociocultural approaches offer valuable insights into second language teaching and learning (Ellis, 2003, 2009b).

1.1.1 Psycholinguistic approaches

Psycholinguistics is concerned with the activity that underlies language processing and development. There is an ongoing debate between the nativist approaches to language acquisition, which assume the existence of innate universal language properties, and those which view general cognitive processing as the source of language development. Both approaches are discussed below in the light of findings from experimental research.

One strand of research into second language acquisition looks at the mental processes involved in acquiring a second language. Over the past five decades, the emphasis has shifted from the initial behaviourist explanations based on Skinner's account (1957), claiming that language learning is the result of habit formation and the reinforcement of successful responses to situational stimuli, to models that rely on cognitive processing as emerging in the individual brain. Within connectionist

accounts of language acquisition, these processes are seen to take place naturally without conscious operation. Regularly occurring forms become fixed patterns as a result of frequency and salience (Gass, 1997; N. Ellis, 2002), and the processes of attention, conscious awareness, monitoring, as well as practice, help to strengthen the patterns and forms and bring about language development. In connectionist models like N. Ellis', a dynamic system of interconnected language exemplars and patterns is seen to emerge out of exposure and use of the language.

In contrast to the theories described above, nativist approaches to language acquisition are devoid of references to general cognition as the source of language development, that is, the idea that language ability grows out of computation performed by generic neural networks as the individual interacts with the environment. The strongest view takes the Chomskyan position that humans are equipped with a mental language faculty that reflects an innate ability to learn languages. Its initial state is known as Universal Grammar (UG). Chomsky (1965) referred to this underlying structure of language as *competence*, while he saw *performance* as the production of actual utterances, or the language in use. Under this paradigm, language is conceived as a system of innate principles (i.e. abstract rules or grammars) combined with a certain number of parameters (markers) that vary across languages (1981). The notions of structure dependence and subadjacency refer to principles believed to occur across languages. An example of the latter would be the head directionality parameter, or the position (head-initial/head-final) of heads in phrases observable in different languages, which is claimed to be acquired by the child early on and functions as a combinatorial pattern or rule that enables him or her to generalise the arrangement of head and

complements to novel utterances. Parameters provide an account of variation across languages. In language universals theory, features that are less marked in a language are learned earlier than those that are marked. To borrow an explanation from Pica:

Surface features that are commonly found across languages, are perceptually salient in a language, and are transparent in their encoding of meaning or function are considered 'unmarked'. Those that are rare or difficult to perceive and to relate to meaning or function are considered 'marked'. (2005, p. 269)

White, adhering to the nativist theory of language universals, reports problems for speakers when a first language (L1) universal parameter is activated that is not present in the second language (L2). Her findings from an empirical study (1985) on the *pro-drop* null subject parameter of Universal Grammar can be interpreted in light of this theory. It is characterized by missing subjects and other properties that cluster with it, such as free subject-verb inversion, and *that*-trace effects (i.e., the fact that a subject cannot be extracted in English when it follows *that*; e.g., "Who did she say that *saw?"). In a study comparing L1 Spanish and L1 French learners of English, White found this parameter to be operative in native speakers of Spanish. In this study, a group of native Spanish and French speakers were given a grammaticality judgement test on a number of English sentences. The results showed that the Spanish speakers accepted many ungrammatical sentences containing these features while the French-speaking controls did not. With increasing levels of proficiency improvement was found, thus suggesting that the learners were able to reset their L1 parameters for the marked English L2 setting.

1.1.2 Sociocultural approaches

In this section we consider one strand within the social interactional approaches to the study of SLA from the wider perspective of learning and educational psychology.

The sociocultural paradigm of mind builds on the principles first originated in Vygotsky (1978, 1987), and later developed by Leontiev (1981), Wertsch (1985), Lantolf and Appel (1994), Lantolf (2000a) and others. It is rooted in principles pointing at socio-cognitive interaction as the source of learning and development. It proposes that an individual's apprehension of the world is mediated by symbolic tools acquired through social interaction in the course of education and learning.

Central constructs in Vygotskian theory are those of *mediation* and the existence of *psychological tools*, "those symbolic artifacts -signs, symbols, texts, formulae, graphic organizers- that when internalized help individuals master their own natural psychological functions of perception, memory, attention, and so on." (Kozulin, 2003, p. 15). Language use, organization, and structure are the primary means of mediation. It is through this mediation that individuals become agents of their own learning.

According to sociocultural theory, mental development can be studied through the analysis of *private speech* (Vygotsky, 1987; Luria, 1982; Saville-Troike, 1988). Saville-Troike has articulated the following categories of private speech patterns: repetition of another's utterances, recall and practice, creation of novel forms, expansion and substitution practice, and rehearsal for interpersonal communication. Lantolf sees private speech as being derived from social speech,

and as the precursor of inner speech. This transition, from without to within the cognitive system of the speaker results in *internalization*, a notion developed by Vygotsky (1978, p. 56), who identified a series of transformations whereby an external activity is first reconstructed and begins to occur internally. An interpersonal process is thus transformed into an intrapersonal one through a series of developmental events.

Another key construct in Vygotsky's theory and also for this study is the *zone of proximal development (ZPD)*. Vygotsky oriented his research to child development, i.e., to “the dynamic relations between the child and his or her particular environment or culture” (Roberts, 2011 p. 47). These assumptions were later generalised in educational theory to include all stages of mental development in the learning process. The ZPD was defined by Vygotsky as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as developed through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). Vygotsky argued that effective instruction should simultaneously identify and target the ZPD. The underlying assumption, as it applies to learning in general, is that, in order to be able to operate independently, learners need external support in dealing with more advanced concepts and processes. This assistance, also referred to as *scaffolding* (Lantolf, 1994, 2000; Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Frawley, 1997; Van Lier, 2000), is provided by more competent others and by mediational tools and artifacts that enable the learner to acquire higher psychological functions. From a socioculturally-based approach learners are seen as agents who regulate

their brain. Studies adapting this framework to L2 acquisition have been carried out by Lantolf and Pavlenko (1995) and Lantolf (2000a, 2003).

For Vygotsky, an accurate assessment of ability requires considering both *actual* and *potential* development. Self-regulation, or what the individual can do independently, represents the essence of actual development while potential development is what is beyond the independent capabilities of the individual as evident during mediated performance. In contrast to processing models of cognition, such as Krashen's, "Vygotsky's theory rejects the notion of the autonomous individual ... as well as the assumption that cognition is something that goes on exclusively, and invisibly, inside the head" (in Lantolf 2005, p. 337). It is interesting to observe, however, as Lantolf (2003, p. 366) insightfully notes, how in the process of internalization learners are active in determining which aspects of the language to focus on, paying attention to those properties of the language that are within their ZPDs. Lantolf acknowledges the ability of adult learners to employ metalinguistic comments in their private speech, but he also views this form of conscious awareness as potentially limiting their ability to use the language freely and spontaneously. Experimental research on the trade-off effect of focusing attention on one area of language, which we deal with later on, appears to support this view.

Within an instructional context, learners engage in collaboration to jointly advance their L2. As Kowal and Swain (1997, cited in Roberts, 2011, p. 296) have pointed out, learners are able to go beyond their present capacities by "externalising" (i.e. exploring collectively) their interlanguage and offering each other feedback, thus contributing to the processes of hypothesis formation and

interlanguage development. We should not ignore the fact that language learners, more so adult foreign language learners approaching oral tasks, such as those targeted in this study, operate at different levels of interlanguage processing, a fact that makes efforts to bring out these differences all the more necessary if teachers are to attend to the needs of each and every student.

1.2 Second language acquisition processes and development

To begin with, a clarification of the term *acquisition* needs to be made as, when calling into play the concept of L2 acquisition, we need to bear in mind that this is not a clear-cut notion referring exclusively to the final attainment of a language form or structure or to the ultimate acquisition of an L2. There are varying degrees to acquisition and different contexts of acquisition. A learner may have acquired the ability to express his or her ideas effectively in English but may have problems with pronunciation; or they may be very fluent in conversation but not so when the situation demands their ability to engage in formal communication. Furthermore, acquisition of a particular form may be in place at one point but then lost as time passes (a process known as backsliding).

Gass and Selinker (2008) draw on the notion of *emergence* to account for the processes involved in developing a second language:

researchers use a variety of criteria to determine when acquisition has taken place. However, one should not lose track of the important and perhaps more interesting factor of emergence. It is not just the point at which something is acquired that is of interest (unless one is comparing the point of acquisition of different forms), but it is also important to consider the stages that a learner goes through in acquiring a particular form. (pp. 81-82)

1.2.1 Second language systems and sequences

Regarding the impact of L2 acquisition on both teaching and learning, the two most significant findings in SLA suggest that acquisition in a second language is highly systematic and that it is also highly variable (in Myles, 2000). In this section we review relevant studies investigating the processes involved in developing a second language, with particular attention to these two lines of enquiry.

The first suggestions that second-language learner attempts at learning the language were distinct from first language acquisition processes were made by Corder (1967, 1981; in Tarone, 2006, p. 748). Corder claimed that learners develop their own linguistic system based on a universal built-in syllabus that guides their development and pointed to a transitional competence that had to be studied longitudinally. Selinker (1972) later introduced the concept of *interlanguage (IL)*, which he defined as the separate linguistic system evidenced when adult second-language learners attempt to express meaning in the language they are in the process of learning. Interlanguages are systematic and follow rules and patterns that change over the course of L2 development. They encompass not just phonology, morphology, and syntax, but also the lexical, pragmatic, and discourse levels. In his seminal study, Selinker also drew attention to the problem of *fossilisation*, or the process whereby IL development ceases, as an attempt to account for the observation that the majority of second language learners fail to attain native-speaker target-language competence (in Han and Selinker, 2005, p. 456).

Cross-linguistic influence (Sharwood Smith, 1983; Sharwood Smith & Kellerman, 1986), or *transfer* from prior knowledge of L1 to L2 is one of the key

processes involved in interlanguage development, but many other aspects, intrinsic and external to the L2 also demand attention.

A considerable amount of research has tried to establish the existence of a natural order of L2 acquisition (Bailey, Madden & Krashen, 1974). This developmental route has been found to be largely independent of both the L1 and the context of learning. One such line of research argues for the existence of a morpheme accuracy order. A number of studies, based on previous empirical research by Dulay and Burt (1973, 1974), identified the following average order as being:

- progressive –ing
- noun plural –s
- copula
- article
- progressive auxiliary
- past irregular
- past regular
- 3rd person singular
- noun possessive -s

(in Pica, 2005, p. 266-267).

Nevertheless, Pica notes the variability that can be found within the order as, for example, accuracy for the progressive –ing was found to be somewhat higher than that for noun plural –s for some learners, while copula seemed to be supplied more accurately than article or progressive auxiliary by other learners, regardless of the L1, the age, whether or not formal instruction was involved in the study, or whether spoken or written samples were used. Another illustrative case, also brought to our attention by Pica (p. 267), reports studies by Zobl (1980, 1982) involving the sequence of appearance of negative particles in English. It has been