Diagnostic potential of group dynamic assessment

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ABSTRACT

A major gap outspokenly voiced by leading scholars in the context of L2 testing concerns the lack of diagnostic tests that aim at surfacing learners' underlying abilities (Alderson, 2005; Poehner, 2009). Dynamic assessment (henceforth DA) armed with the interaction tool which is construed as a pivotal mainstay of Vygotsky's Socio-cultural Theory of Mind has been recently introduced to function as a robust diagnostic procedure to feed back into educational practices (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Poehner, 2005; Ableeva, 2008). However, as for diagnostic assessment of L2 listening in the classroom, no worthwhile attempt has been made thus far (Buck, 2003; Vandergrift, 2006; Ableeva, 2010); hence, the need to undertake the present study. This paper has set out to explore the feasibility of group dynamic assessment (G-DA) in the classroom context as a diagnostic procedure to identify the intermediate L2 learners' listening difficulties and the effects of G-DA on their listening development. In so doing, a group of intermediate L2 learners were recruited and instructed for a time span of two months. An interactionist, concurrent G-DA methodology guided the research design of this study. The results of qualitative analysis of G-DA protocols revealed that through continent, graduated and dialogic interactions with the learners in their Zone of Proximal Development G-DA can microgenetically uncover the learners' sources of listening difficulties. The analysis brought to surface phonological, lexical and grammatical as the most rampant sources of difficulties during listening comprehension. The G-DA interactions also revealed how collective scaffolding (Donato, 1994) could help establish a state of intersubjectivity (Platt & Brooks, 1994) within the social space of the class during which secondary interactants benefited from the contributions of primary interactants (Poehner, 2009). Finally, on implication side, this paper recommends the use of G-DA methodology as an efficient and student/mediator-friendly procedure in the social microcosm of the classroom context to truly assess L2 learners' listening comprehension processes and help promote the abilities which are in the state of maturation.

Introduction

As an innovative assessment procedure and armed with interaction tool, dynamic assessment (henceforth DA) precipitating a testing renaissance in developmental psychology and later on in L2 pedagogy has recently come to the fore to comprehensively crystallize learners' abilities through identifying both their transparent (independent) and hidden (potential) abilities (Poehner, 2009; Ableeva, 2010; Shabani et al., 2010). What this paper has set out to explore is to test the diagnostic potential of group dynamic assessment (hereafter G-DA) as a new variant of Vygotskian SCT-based DA in surfacing L2 learners' listening comprehension processes.

Diagnostic assessment in L2 context

The L2 field has been so obsessed with the development of standardized, high-stakes tests that the diagnostic mission of language testing has been consigned to oblivion. In this regard, Alderson (2005) complains that such a sedate disposition and dormant interest in diagnostic assessment in L2 testing has led to "a considerable confusion and indeed ignorance about what diagnostic testing might entail" (Alderson, 2005, p. 26). He goes further to state that even classroom-based assessments have failed to put into effect principles of diagnostic assessment and no worthwhile attempt has been made to cater for the students' developmental needs.

Contrasting diagnostic testing with other types of language tests like placement, achievement, and proficiency, Alderson (2005) clarifies that the main goal of diagnostic testing is to bring to surface the strong and weak sides of learners' abilities so that in the light of the information obtained the teacher can provide the most suitable remedial instruction for enhancing the students' learning. This goal is more explicitly reflected in the ALTE's no worthwhile attempt has been made to cater for the students' developmental needs.

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Stipulating that any assessment practice should benefit from a theoretical support, Alderson points out that unlike L1 diagnostic testing which is strongly supported by a theory and

usually conducted on one-on-one/individual basis, L2 diagnostic assessment suffers from a well-established theory. He suggests that:

If tests are informed by an adequate theory of language use, language development and language learning, and if learners can receive feedback on their performance and their ability immediately, then the possibility for the incorporation of assessment into language learning becomes apparent, indeed urgent (Alderson, 2005, p. 12)

Alderson (2005) points out that if testing theoreticians and practitioners are not aware of how language proficiency develops they can "hardly claim to be able to help learners develop such an ability" (2005, p. 1). He notes that learners go through language development and the phrase 'diagnosis in order to improve learning' is very common among the teachers who claim that they have an understanding of learners' development but quite paradoxically we observe a lack of detailed description of what changes occur as learners develop a language and that there are no valid diagnostic tests developed to be explicitly diagnostic of foreign language proficiency (Alderson, 2005). He, then, claims that diagnostic procedures have strong capacity to improve our understanding of language development.

Inspired by the findings in L1 and L2 research, Alderson, then, offers the following list of features that he suggests might characterize L2 diagnostic testing:

1. Diagnostic tests are designed to identify strengths and weaknesses in a learner's knowledge and use of language.
2. Diagnostic tests are more likely to focus on weaknesses than on strengths.
3. Diagnostic tests should lead to remediation in further instruction.
4. Diagnostic tests should enable a detailed analysis and report of responses to items or tasks.
5. Diagnostic tests thus give detailed feedback which can be acted upon.
6. Diagnostic tests provide immediate results, or results as little delayed as possible after test-taking.
7. Diagnostic tests are typically low-stakes or no-stakes.
8. Because diagnostic tests are not high-stakes they can be expected to involve little anxiety or other affective barriers to optimum performance.
9. Diagnostic tests are based on content which has been covered in instruction, or which will be covered shortly.
10. Diagnostic test are based on some theory of language development, preferably a detailed theory rather than a global theory.
11. Thus diagnostic tests need to be informed by SLA research, or more broadly by applied linguistic theory as well as research.
12. Diagnostic tests are likely to be less 'authentic' than proficiency or other tests.
13. Diagnostic tests are more likely to be discrete-point than integrative, or more focused on specific elements than on global abilities.
14. Diagnostic tests are more likely to focus on language than on language skills.
15. Diagnostic tests are more likely to focus on 'low-level' language skills (like phoneme discrimination in listening tests) than higher-order skills which are more integrated.
16. Diagnostic tests of vocabulary knowledge and use are less likely to be useful than diagnostic test of grammatical knowledge and the ability to use that knowledge in context.
17. Tests of detailed grammatical knowledge and use are difficult to construct because of the need to cover a range of contexts and to meet the demands of reliability.
18. Diagnostic tests of language use skills like speaking, listening, reading and writing are (said to be) easier to construct than tests of language knowledge and use. Therefore the results of such tests may be interpretable for remediation or instruction.
19. Diagnostic testing is likely to be enhanced by being computer-based.

Figure 3 Characteristics of L2 diagnostic tests (Alderson, 2005, pp. 11-12)

Finally, underscoring the components of a theory with a diagnostic orientation Alderson notes:

Without a theory of development, a theory, perhaps also, of failure, and an adequate understanding of what underlies normal development as well as what causes abnormal development or lack of development, adequate diagnosis is unlikely. (Alderson, 2005, p. 25)

In response to Alderson's quest for a robust theory to back up L2 diagnostic assessment, Ableeva (2010) suggests that Vygotsky's developmental theory represents such a theory since it underscores diagnosis of learners' failure, provision of finely-grained feedbacks and promotion of learners' abilities. Ableeva argues that Vygotsky's approach to assessment has been known as dynamic assessment (DA). Following Vygotsky, she defines

DA as a procedure that dialectically unifies instruction and assessment into one activity. In the same vein, Poehner and Lantolf (2010), two leading and staunch advocates and contemporary, prolific researchers of Vygotsky's Socio-cultural Theory in L2 context contend that DA originally implemented in developmental psychology and later on in L1 and L2 educational research represents an assessment procedure that has a strong diagnostic capacity to dip into the learners' underlying difficulties (cognitive and linguistic) and redress the abilities which are in the state of maturation.

Diagnostic assessment of L2 listening

A mind-boggling issue confronting L2 assessment practitioners is the current lack of diagnostic tests that allow language educators to identify the source of listening difficulties and to track the development of learners' listening abilities. Highlighting the dearth of studies on listening with diagnostic orientation, Buck (2003, p. 97) notes that "there are currently few diagnostic tests of listening, largely because we still do not fully understand what the subskills of listening are; nor are we sure what information educators need to teach listening better". Also in this line, Field (2008) underscoring the significance of expertise and theoretical knowledge about the listening skill contends that one main reason for downgrading the listening skill is the teachers' unfamiliarity with the process and subcomponents of the listening skill. He then argues that in order to teach listening effectively the teachers should have "a clear picture of the end behavior they are aiming to achieve in their learners. Yet, teachers' manuals tend to be vague or sometimes inaccurate about the processes that make up listening, about the problems it poses for those acquiring a second language and about the precise nature of the input which the novice listeners have to learn to handle" (Field, 2008, p. 6).

In the context of L2 research and specially studies on listening, a major shortcoming inflicting the traditional product methodology of listening assessment has been its pursuit of causes of students' listening failures in the language and meaning of the text. As Field (1998) argues a conventional listening comprehension lesson simply adds only another text to the learners' experience; it does little or nothing to improve the effectiveness of their listening or to address their shortcomings as listeners. Under this product-oriented comprehension approach, success in listening is measured by correct responses to questions or tasks. Teachers focus upon the outcomes of listening, rather than upon listening itself, upon product rather than process. The outcome of such a procedure is learners' inability to generalize basic listening skills to new texts and repeat the same faulty listening strategies in new listening tasks (Field, 1998). The main reason lies in the nature of product-oriented approach to listening which belittles the cognitive and metacognitive processes involved in the act of listening. More precisely, what this approach suffers from is its proclivity to eschew a diagnostic orientation towards the students' listening abilities.

In this regard, Brown (1986, p. 286) explains that "until we have some diagnostic procedures, the teacher can only continue to test comprehension, not to teach it. We need to move to a position where the teacher is able to recognize particular patterns of behavior manifested by an unsuccessful listener and to provide exercises for the student which will promote superior patterns of behavior".

This paper makes an attempt to respond to an outspoken concern voiced eloquently by Buck (2003, p. 97) that "there are currently few diagnostic tests of listening, largely because we

still do not fully understand what the important sub-skills of listening are; nor are we sure what information educators need to teach [and to assess] listening better". The paper also fills the gap in the literature on L2 listening assessment which currently lacks a qualitative analysis of processes involved in listening comprehension (Vandergrift, 2007). To realize this aim, it gives the report of how a qualitative method can better uncover the sources of difficulties in listening to the oral/aural text and how G-DA can help L2 listeners attain successful comprehension.

Group dynamic assessment

As in DA, the implicit assumption underlying G-DA is the presumed dialectic unity of assessment and instruction, a property that affords a fine-grained diagnosis of emergent (i.e. 'ripening' to use Vygotsky's terminology) abilities, detecting sources of difficulties and, at the same time, prompting development. What is taken as a point of departure in Vygotskian assessment is the tacit assumption that DA and by extension G-DA which represent a diagnostic and formative approach to assessment grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) notion of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) have the potential to alleviate the raised concerns by taking on board both the current and potential levels of learners' abilities (Shabani, 2010). Vygotsky claims that under conditions of collaborative or assisted performance students may reveal certain emergent functions that have not yet been internalized. These functions which are in the state of ripening forming learners' ZPD should form our concern rather than those fully developed functions constituting learners' Zone of Actual Development (ZAD). ZPD assessment gives us a deeper understanding of learners' abilities than just ZAD.

Inspired by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of mind and specially his concept of ZPD, group dynamic assessment (G-DA) placing respectable premium on collaborative negotiation of language tokens rests on the premise that it is possible to engage a group of learners in collaboratively co-constructing a group's ZPD while catering to each individual's ZPD. Moreover, G-DA postulates that through joint efforts the group might function in ways that are beyond the present capabilities of any individual member (Gibbons, 2003; Poehner, 2009).

Poehner (2009), a leading advocate of G-DA, argues that group-based and one-to-one DA follow the same principle of offering learners mediation to help them co-construct a ZPD, but they differ in that G-DA must also take account of group's ZPD. As an illustration, Lantolf and Poehner (2010) report the results of a G-DA study in which the teacher offers mediating support to a group of learners. The teacher does not run through the full range of mediating prompts with a single learner before beginning again with another individual. Instead, the teacher's focus remains fixed on the entire class but by calling on a particular student to answer a question and then addressing another to continue the preceding contribution, the teacher moves the entire class forward in its ZPD through co-constructing ZPDs with individuals. He explains "a group ZPD from this perspective is predicated upon tasks that require a level of functioning beyond what any group member can reach independently but that every group member may reach with mediation, although it is understood that some members in the group will require more extensive mediation than others" (p. 30). Poehner (2009) argues that by engaging learners in tasks which are challenging to all and providing support that benefit the group the teacher can establish a network of social cohesion that helps create a joint orientation towards solving the problems at hand. Poehner (2009) identifies two types of interactants

during group dynamic assessment; namely, the primary interactants including the teacher and one of the students with whom he negotiates his linguistic support/mediation and the secondary interactants including other students who listen and benefit from the teacher-student exchanges. He argues that because the exchange occurs in the social space of the class and before the other group members it has mediating potential for the rest of the group as well and the primary and secondary interactants during an exchange are in a constant state of flux. Moreover, he identifies two approaches to G-DA; concurrent and cumulative. In the concurrent G-DA, the teacher dialogues with the entire group. He may provide mediation in response to an individual but the interaction shifts rapidly between primary and secondary interactants as one learner's question, struggle, or comment sets the stage for another's contribution. He notes that the absence of extended one-on-one interactions does not preclude development within individuals' ZPD. In the cumulative G-DA, the teacher "conducts a series of one-to-one DA interactions as the group works toward the mastery of a problem; that is, the individuals take turns engaging directly as primary interactants with the teacher, with the understanding that each subsequent one-to-one exchange will have the advantage of building on earlier interactions that the class witnessed. This approach is cumulative in that the goal is to move the entire group forward in its ZPD through negotiations with individual learners in their respective ZPDs. Cumulative G-DA attempts to move the group forward through co-constructing ZPDs with individuals, but concurrent G-DA supports the development of each individual by working within the group's ZPD" (Poehner, 2009, p. 488).

Methodology

This section sketches the methodology used to implement the G-DA. The theoretical framework to guide the analysis rests on a qualitative, microgenetic methodology that undertakes the diagnosis of listening problems among intermediate L2 learners of English and development of their listening abilities.

Study design

This study aligned itself with an interactionist G-DA approach and a microgenetic methodology i.e. an SCT-based method. Moreover, the study is also characterized by a longitudinal design which enabled the researcher to observe the development of learners' listening comprehension over time.

More precisely, a number of exemplary works served as the theoretical basis to guide the research design of this study namely Poehner's (2005) and (2009), Ableeva's (2010) and Aljaafreh and Lantolf's (1994). As in Poehner's study, the present design follows a pretest-enrichment-posttest-transfer session format. With some changes and following Ableeva (2010) who conducted a DA research on listening in a time span of 9 weeks, our design is characterized by an NDA elicitation stage immediately followed by a mediation process phase (DA intervention). However, unlike Poehner's (2005) and Ableeva's (2008) which followed a one-to-one mediator-learner tutoring format, this study adhered to Poehner's (2009) recently suggested group-based format of dynamic assessment or G-DA. Another work guiding our design was Aljaafreh and Lantolf's (1994) which informed the mediational procedures of our G-DA interactions in terms of such principles as contingency, graduation and dialogic negotiation.

In this study, a pretest was conducted to diagnose the students' independent performance abilities and their main sources of difficulties i.e. phonological, syntactic, lexical, cultural, etc. To address learners' recurring problems, an

enrichment program lasting for six weeks was offered. Then, a posttest was administered followed by two transfer/transcendence sessions aimed at understanding the extent to which students could extrapolate their newly acquired knowledge to innovative contexts. Except for the first pretest week in which three intensive sessions were held every other day, the remaining sessions were administered once a week for a time period of 11 weeks. The study sessions ran as is schematically illustrated below:

Week 1   pretest (NDA + DA)
Week 2-7   enrichment program (EP)
Week 8-9   posttest (NDA + DA)
Week 10   transfer 1 (transcendence)
Week 11   transfer 2 (transcendence)
Week 12   transfer 3 (transcendence)

Recruiting participants

This research involved a group of undergraduate students of English major with an intermediate level of linguistic proficiency recruited from Allameh Mohaddes Nouri College. The learners' status being 'intermediate' refers to the number of semesters they have spent studying English at the college; their status was not determined by an independent measure of language proficiency. Thus, the participants are named intermediate by virtue of their enrollment in a fifth semester undergraduate university language course. They consist of both males and females ranging in age from 20 to 25.

Procedure

In a nutshell, the G-DA procedure took the following steps:

1.At the onset of each assessment session, students were told that they first had to listen to the clip up to the end. This advance organizer was intended to familiarize students with the overall theme and context of the news. Moreover, the students were told that their active presence and contributions, however minimal, in the class are of vital importance to their learning and that their silence would be interpreted as lack of understanding.

2.Then, the teacher replayed the clip proceeding portion by portion and asked the class to provide their recalls. Upon the students' failure to recall the content of the sentence during the NDA phase which revealed the students' independent performance ability, the mediator (teacher) intervened and offered his leading questions, prompts, hints and explanations to mediate in their understanding of the text and, in this way, uncover their potential level of development.

3.Upon the students' failure to recall the content of the sentence during the NDA phase which revealed the students' independent performance ability, the mediator (teacher) intervened and offered his leading questions, prompts, hints and explanations to mediate in their understanding of the text and, in this way, uncover their potential level of development.

Data analysis and discussion

The qualitative analysis reported here which is part of a larger study takes into account the G-DA interactions that occurred in the pretest, posttest and TR sessions. The protocols have been mainly drawn from the mediated portions of the assessment sessions that involved interaction and assistance; however, reports of independent performance (IP) are sometimes given wherever needed.

From among different factors affecting L2 listening comprehension, the most pervasive problems faced in this study were phonological and lexical. The microgenetic investigation of interactions provided evidence of how a problem at the phonological level crippled learners' comprehension of the entire sentence. Since the main goal of this paper is to underscore the diagnostic potential of G-DA, the analysis of the protocols discussed below would mostly foreground moments of interactions where listening problems were identified.

Phonology: diagnosing the problem through mediation

The phonological problem was a serious impeding factor to the smooth comprehension of learners' oral/aural text processing. The qualitative analysis of G-DA interactions revealed that in many cases, due to an underdeveloped L2 phonological system, learners tended not to recognize the words they already knew well. The discussion below illustrates the potential of G-DA in diagnosing learners' problems caused by a poorly developed phonology. The example below elucidates the diagnostic value of G-DA:

Confusing one word with another

One ubiquitous problem learners were grappling with was confusion of one familiar word with another once heard in rapid speech. This phonological confusion constituted a big challenge in text comprehension. When the confused segment was highlighted through focusing or other mediational moves, learners were, and on certain occasions were not, able to disambiguate their confusion and provide the correct decoding. Protocol 1 illustrates one of such problems:

Protocol 1

[Some foreign companies have promised to reduce the fees they will charge for constructing new buildings.]

1. T: let's listen again.
2. Ss: [silent]
3. T: What words did you hear?
4. S1: some companies have promised
5. T: Good, what else?
6. S2: reduce
7. T: reduce what?
8. S2: reduce defeats
9. T: Is that 'defeats'? Does it make sense? You need to pay more attention to the words after 'reduce'. Let's listen again.
10. S3: charge
11. T: Ok, what else?
12. S4: # I think it is 'the fees'
13. T: Great! How did you understand?
14. S4: mamulan fees va charge ba ham estefade mishan ^ ['fees' and 'charge' are usually used together]

As can be understood from this protocol, the mediational strategy of replaying the segment together with confirming the correct response helped the teacher to gradually detect learners' misunderstood segment. By the time the mediator found that the learners had mixed up 'the fees' with 'defeats', he offered his next mediational strategy of saying the erroneous guess questioningly which led to a correct recall by one of the students. This example shows that one or possibly other learners had access to the heard lexical item ('the fees') but had confused it with another word ('defeats') which seemed phonologically similar. Analysis of this interaction also revealed that G-DA could inform the mediator of the type of cognitive processing involved when the learners are struggling to solve a listening problem. The teacher asks student 4 (line 13) to explain how he got to the correct word, a technique which he surmised might have instructional value for other students. The student explained that the word 'charge', said previously by one of his classmates, reminded him of the intended word, an observation which corroborated the critical role of co-textual (collocational) knowledge in listening comprehension.

A second thought on this interaction and the contribution, though unsuccessful, made by one of the learners (a primary

interactant) to help another (a secondary interactant) to arrive at the correct response is truly reminiscent of the concept of 'collective scaffolding', a concept that reflects principles of group learning in Vygotskian perspective.

This interaction reflects how G-DA can simultaneously serve two important functions, a) to diagnose sources of learners' comprehension problems and 2) to offer, as part of instructional practice, the most appropriate, finely-tuned mediation to remedy the emerging problems. This dual function (assessment and instruction for development) lies at the heart of DA as well as G-DA which makes them quite distinct from other assessment practices.

Diagnosing a lexical problem

The discussion below is based on a G-DA interaction which illustrates how learners' poor listening might result from a gap in their lexical knowledge:

Not understanding a received word

A number of times, learners were found able to pick up the constituent sounds of an unknown word through guided interaction. In such cases, they were asked to check its meaning in the dictionary if they were found unable to guess its meaning. The diagnosis of this problem was documented in protocol 3 below:

Protocol 3

[The fighting caused heavy casualties, and Palestinians hunkered down in their homes.]

1. T: what did you understand?
2. S1: fighting caused causalities
3. T: good
4. S2: heavy casualties
5. T: right, what else?
6. S3: Palestinian in homes
7. T: That's right. But what is the word after 'Palestinians'?
8. S4: unker?
9. S3: hunker?
10. T: yes hunker. That's right. But, what does it mean?
11. Ss: [silent]
12. T: Check out the meaning of 'hunker down' in the dictionary. [Teacher writes the word on the board]
13. S3: continue to stay in a position or place
14. T: that's right, the speaker is saying that although there were so many casualties and many people killed, they did not leave their home and stayed there to show their resistance.

As the protocol demonstrates, students could collectively recall the first clause on their own each making a minor contribution but when it came to the second clause, they stopped short of arriving at a full comprehension. Here, after eliciting independent recalls from students and using focusing strategy, the mediator asked the students to pick up the words after 'Palestinians'. A wild guess was made by student 4 (line 8) but overlooked by the teacher. Then, student 3 made a relevant contribution by telling, though a bit hesitantly, the correct word ('hunker' in line 9). But, when asked to provide its meaning, he and his classmates remained silent again. Therefore, the mediator understood that the lexical item students were grappling with was the verb 'hunker down' which had caused breakdown in their comprehension. He asked students to check its meaning in the dictionary while writing the word on the board. After student 3 gave the dictionary meaning of the word, he paraphrased the two clauses to let the class fully understand the message underlying the two clauses.

Diagnosing grammar-related problems

L2 studies of listening overwhelmingly reject the significant effect of grammatical knowledge on listening comprehension in favor of lexical knowledge (Mecartty, 2000; Vanderfgrift et al, 2006). For instance, Mecartty (2000) examined the role of grammatical knowledge and lexical knowledge in both listening and reading comprehension. The results of her hierarchical multiple regression analysis indicated that only vocabulary was a significant predictor of listening/reading comprehension. Determining lexical knowledge as a significant contributor to listening comprehension was also confirmed by Vandergrift (2006) who conducted a research on the role of L1 comprehension ability and L2 proficiency in L2 listening comprehension. Quite in line with Mecartty (2000), the results of Vandergrift's study "point to the potentially important role of vocabulary development (less so grammar) in L2 listening proficiency" (Vandergrift, 2006, p. 15).

The results of the present study drawn from a microgenetic (qualitative) analysis also confirm the findings of previous L2 listening research highlighting the critical role of vocabulary in listening comprehension. However, the qualitative analysis provided evidence of the effect of grammatical knowledge on L2 learners' listening comprehension. The protocol below exemplifies how a gap in grammatical knowledge can negatively affect learners' listening comprehension processes.

Ignoring a grammar point

In some cases, learners were found unable to understand a segment because of ignoring the available grammatical cues but through collective scaffolding and joint cooperation they were able to decode the unrecognized word(s). Protocol 4 below extracted from a more extended interaction is illustrative of this scenario:

Protocol 4

[…the minister reiterated US demands for Hamas to stop stirring up trouble.]

Listen

1. S6: stairy?
2. T: Do we have such a word in English? What does it mean?
3. Ss: [silent]
4. T: what is the grammatical category of this word? Is that an adjective, a noun, adverb or verb?
5. Ss: [silent]
6. S7: it can be a verb
7. T: how did you know that?
8. S7: because of 'up' after it
9. S8: and also because of '-ing' in the end
10. T: That's right, it has an '-ing' in the end. So, it is a verb and after that we have 'up'. Now, listen again and make your final guess.

Listen

11. S5: staring?
12. T: @ what preposition do we bring after 'stare'? stare in, down, at,…what?
13. S8: stare at
14. T: Good, so it is not 'stare'. Stare is followed by 'at' but here we have 'up'. Listen again. Find another word similar to 'stare' in pronunciation but a verb that can take 'up' as its particle.

Listen

15. S5: stirring?
16. T: Could you spell it?
17. S5: s-t-i-r

18. T: stir, stirring. That's it! This is the correct word. Do you know its meaning?
19. S5: stir yani be ham zadan ^ (stir means mix)
20. T: exactly, but you need to check its second meaning
21. S5: it means provoke, increase
22. T: That's it

As is clear from this extract, students' independent recall showed their misinterpretation of the word 'stirring' as 'stairy' which proved to be a wild guess since no body could provide its meaning. Then, as part of his scaffolding the teacher reminds students of the grammatical function of the word (line 4) and interestingly receives the correct response (line 6). The students explained that the words 'up' after the concerned word and '-ing' at the end of it helped them understand the word's part of speech (lines 8-9).

The teacher proceeds to ask the class to rely upon these two pieces of information and make another guess. At this juncture, the response received was 'staring' which sounded very similar to the word in question but still a wrong choice. This showed that the learner hadn't noticed the grammatical point that 'stare' doesn't take the particle 'up', a consciousness that was raised afterwards.

The exchanged interactions and grammatical consciousness-raising eventually helped student 5 to correctly guess the word in question along with its meaning but still not totally correct because he hadn't guessed its relevant sense. Therefore, he was asked to provide another meaning of the word. Referring to his dictionary, he provided the suitable sense of the word. Student 5's correct recall of the word after the exchanged interactions confirms the effects of grammatical consciousness-raising on his comprehension.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to illustrate the potential role of G-DA in bringing to surface the underlying causes of learners' listening difficulties. A number of factors affecting listening comprehension were identified that were classified into three main categories namely phonological, lexical and grammatical. The phonological difficulty appeared mostly in the form of confusing one word with another and not recognizing a known word. Inadequate lexical knowledge was another frequent source of difficulty that appeared in the form of not understanding the received words that was resolved either implicitly through G-DA interactions or explicitly through overt explanations. The third source of difficulty was a gap in learners' grammatical knowledge which took the form of ignoring a known grammar point.

The identification of aforementioned sources of difficulties afforded deeper insights into the learners' comprehension processes which altogether attest to the quality of G-DA in diagnosing learners' listening comprehension and offering an informed, finely-tuned, and contingent instruction/mediation. The results also speak to the fact that L2 phonology was a serious contributor to breakdowns in listening comprehension. Aside from phonology, poorly developed lexis and grammar could account for much of the difficulty in the L2 listeners' comprehension processes.

The analysis of the protocols also confirmed the important role of collective scaffolding and mediatory moves of individual students in stretching the group ZPD to the accomplishment of listening problems that had surpassed the limits of individuals' ZPDs.

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