Speaking Fluency:

Technology in EFL Context or Social Interaction in ESL Context?

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Abstract: Language learning can occur outside the classroom setting unconsciously through interaction with the native speakers or exposure to authentic language input through technology. EFL context lacks the social interaction to boost language learning. Accordingly, this study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of exposure to audio/visual mass media as a source of language input in EFL context and social interaction as a source of language input in ESL context on speaking fluency. To achieve this purpose, a sample speaking test was administered to one hundred language learners in Iran which is an EFL context and one hundred language learners in Malaysia which is an ESL context. Then, forty participants from each context where selected. During the experiment, EFL participants had exposure to audio/visual mass media while the ESL participants had exposure to social interaction. At the end, both groups took another sample speaking test. The post-test showed that the EFL group performed better which proved that exposure to technology promotes speaking fluency.
Key words: Exposure; Mass media; Social Context; EFL Context; ESL Context

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, technology has dominated the world by providing a variety of programs to both instruct and entertain the audience in informal setting. The impressive developments in audio, video, and computer-mediated communications programs offer many possibilities for teachers to construct activities around listening and watching different programs (Chinnery, 2005; Bell, 2003; Ishihara & Chi, 2004; Bedjou, 2006). Moreover, technology has become the track upon which the express train of education is heading toward its destination.

Informal language learning was first introduced by Knowles (1950). Rogers (2004) suggests that informal language learning is unstructured, unpurposeful. On the contrary, formal language learning is structured, purposeful, and school based (Lightbown and Spada, 2001).

However, regarding formal and informal language learning in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, Rogers (2004) notes that in ESL context English is

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dominantly spoken or is the official language where language learners acquire English through social interaction. This is while; in some countries such as Iran, English is not the primary or dominant language spoken, so English is considered a foreign language rather than a second language.

The social interaction in ESL context can contribute to informal language learning. This social interaction does not exist in EFL context. However, informal language learning can occur when people have interaction with each other by means of English language or implicitly learn the language through the use of different technologies which demand interaction in English language.

In the same line, the present research aimed at comparing the effect of two different language inputs in two different contexts on speaking fluency based on informal language learning theory.

1. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A lot of researches which are related to the present study consider the use of technology and interaction in social context in informal settings in ESL context to enhance language learning (Adams, Morrison, and Reedy, 1968; Decker, 1976; Keller, 1987; Pemberton *et al*, 2004).

Decker (1976) also argues that most significantly, CALL provides instant feedback correcting drill exercises and tests. It seems that Decker has based his arguments regarding the use of CALL in informal settings based on the behaviorist approach that emphasizes stimulus response for habit formation. In other words, language learners use the computer which is a kind of technology in both formal and informal learning settings generally to do some repetition and drills which is believed by the behaviorists to boost language learning. In this regards, Pemberton *et al* (2004) highlight that in actual informal language learning setting compared to formal language learning setting ,the participants are not supposed to get involved in a sort of activity which requires them to do repetitions and drills similar to that of the classroom settings. In the same line, Rogers (2004) emphasizes that if different technological tools are to be used in informal setting for language learning, it should be unstructured, unconscious or unpurposeful.

Regarding the application of the behaviorist theory of language learning in relation to the use of technology in informal language learning environment, Rogers (2004) notes that the behaviorists have worked well in explicit teaching and computer-assisted instruction but they would not be suitable for learning informally from exposure to audio/visual mass media. Based on the informal language learning, the language learners are not supposed to learn the language through having exposure to something in informal language setting which is made for language learning requiring them to be involved in repetition and drills in away similar to class or lab.

In recent years, the use of "non-desktop" technologies such as audio/visual mass media, for example, TV is also attracting increasing interest amongst researchers in informal, adult and lifelong learning and second language acquisition (Milton, 2002; Evans, 2006; Mackenzie, 1997; Pemberton *et al*, 2004).

Exposure to mass media news, for example, TV and radio news, the pedagogical value of such materials, and the possibility of using TV and radio news at all levels of EFL/ESL settings in order to enhance different language skills have been the focus of so many studies (Brinton and Gaskill, 1978; Cauldwell, 1996; Mackenzie, 1997; Cabaj and Nicolic, 2000; Bell, 2003, to name only a few).

However, the majority of the mentioned descriptive and experimental works have been conducted on social interaction and language learning in informal language learning settings in ESL context. Some have also studied the pedagogical value and the effect of technology on promoting language learning in formal and informal language learning setting in both ESL and EFL context based on behaviorist approach. In other words, none of the researches has focused on EFL context which lacks the social interaction similar to that of the ESL one. Consequently, the present research considered audio/visual mass media exposure as a type of language input in EFL context to enhance language learning compared to the social interaction of the ESL context.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

One of the problems that EFL learners confront is how to improve their speaking fluency. Limited access to a real context has forced teachers in Iran to rely on textbooks and other classroom materials in teaching language. These materials are the only source of materials which are being used by language learners. Consequently, for English language learners to acquire a satisfying speaking fluency in EFL contexts a lot requires to be done not only from the learners themselves but also from the instructors who are to help and guide the learners to use and have exposure to authentic and appropriate materials in- and out- side the classroom.

As was mentioned before, in some countries such as Iran where English is a foreign language rather than a second language, the situation is different. Social interaction does not exist out of the classroom settings. People do not speak English as a second language. Actually, Language learners in Iran have no exposure to language out-side the classroom except the use of technology such as TV as a kind of mass media. In this regard, technology is the only means to be used rather than traditional ways such as books to improve their English. TV as a kind of mass media technology can provide the language learners to authentic materials. Based on the informal language learning theory, language learners may be able to improve their speaking fluency through exposure to mass media out-side the academic setting. Whatever the story, one of the audio-visual inputs which may prove effective in helping EFL learners to improve their speaking fluency where social interaction does not exist may be exposure to mass media. To this effect, this research intended to investigate the effect of exposure to mass media on EFL learners' speaking fluency compared to that of the social interaction in ESL context.

3. METHOD

3.1 Subjects

The participants of this study were initially one hundred language learners including both males and females from Iran as an EFL context and one hundred language learners including both males and females from Malaysia as an ESL context. Out of the initial participant from each context 40 participants were selected based on a speaking fluency pre-test.

3.2 Instruments and materials

The first instrument was a set of sample IELTS speaking fluency test which was used as a pre-test and post-test. This study will have parallel rather than the same pre-post tests to ensure the internal validity.

In order to score the speaking tests so many valid checklists developed by Hughes (2003), Heaton (1990) and Underhill (1987) are available to use. However, a checklist developed by Askari (2006) which is obtained from reviewing and adopting the above mentioned checklists was used as the second instrument. Fluency, accuracy, comprehension, communication, vocabulary and accent are the six components of the checklist (see appendix). The checklist scores each speaking test out of 30. Moreover, each component incorporates five points. The validity of the checklist was verified by Askari based on a pilot study.

3.3 Procedure

This research was conducted based on pre-test and post-test design. The first step to take, before the participants were selected, was to verify the reliability of the sample speaking fluency pre-post tests. To do so, the tests were given to a group of language learners in both contexts separately. Then, the reliabilities of both tests were calculated separately by means of KR-21 formula. Once the reliabilities of the above-mentioned tests were verified, the tests were given to one two EFL students including both males and females in Iran and one hundred ESL learners in Malaysia. When the scores of the tests were obtained, 40 participants who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as homogeneous language learners from each context.

Each speaking test was scored out of 30 based on the checklist. In order to increase the reliability of the speaking scores, rating activities were carried out first by the researcher himself and then by an inter-rater and later the mean score of speaking pre-post tests for every participant was calculated.

Throughout the experiment which lasted for one year, the participants in the EFL contexts were asked to have exposure to audio/visual mass media in informal language learning setting and the participants in the ESL context had exposure to the social interaction context in informal setting.

After one year of exposure of EFL participants to audio/visual mass media and ESL participants to social interaction, all the participants took the second parallel speaking fluency test from IELTS as a post-test to check if there was any change in their speaking fluency. The results of the post-test showed a significant difference between EFL and ESL participants' performance (see appendix 2). EFL participants performed better than the participants in ESL context which was indicative of the fact that exposure to audio/visual mass media technology has more effect on speaking fluency development that social interaction.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the post-test (see appendix 2) proved that greater exposure to audio/visual mass media as a source of authentic language input improves speaking fluency in EFL context more than the social interaction in ESL context.

The results are in line with the studies conducted by Brinton and Gaskill (1978), Cauldwell (1996), and Mackenzie (1997) regarding the effect of exposure to mass media on improving different language skills. It also sheds more light on what Krashen (1981) claims regarding exposure to language through social interaction in informal language learning setting in ESL context. Accordingly, more exposure does not necessarily mean more proficiency in ESL.

The reason that ESL participants improved their speaking fluency less than the participants in EFL context who had no access to social interaction may be supported by zone of proximal development (ZDF) and scaffolding.

The notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) is essential in understanding the distance between the actual developmental levels as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance of and in collaboration with more capable peers. Vygotsky believes that learning occurs when the learner is struggling in the ZPD to fulfill the task. Learners being in the ESL context are often likely to be in the ZPD or noticing their linguistic gaps. Those communication gaps are significant in terms of compelling the learner into some strategies to maintain the discourses. In informal language learning setting in EFL context, conversations are developed according to social needs and the language to be used is unpredictable but goal-oriented and meaningful with abundant opportunities for operating within the learner's ZPD. In this sense, informal settings would seem to be more proactive for SLA. In this study, once entered into action or interaction in informal settings outside school, the adult language learners need support to express themselves where their language skills and capabilities are insufficient. The necessary help to assist the learner to use the appropriate language to make the discourse continue is the process of 'scaffolding'. The scaffolding outside school is given by ordinary people, not language teachers. However, this support from peers in social interaction aims at making the language easier which may not contribute to language development particularly speaking fluency.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to fill the gap in the experimental work on finding an authentic source of language input that can best contribute to developing speaking fluency in EFL context which lacks the social context similar to that of the ESL one. Consequently, the effect of exposure to audio/visual mass media in EFL context, on one hand, and social interaction in ESL context, on the other hand, on speaking

fluency was studied. In brief the researcher arrived at the following conclusions. The results of the study proved that in EFL context, language learners having exposure to authentic language input rather than the social interaction; should use different techniques to adapt themselves with the linguistic level of the input. On the contrary, social interaction in ESL context can decrease the development for the sake of communication.

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APPENDIX 1

The Sample Checklist for Measuring Communicative Abilities:

Scale I- Fluency:

☐ 5- Speaks fluently.

☐ 4- Speaks with near-native like fluency, pauses and hesitations do not interfere with comprehension

☐ 3- Speaks with occasional hesitations.

☐ 2- Speaks hesitantly and slowly because of rephrasing and searching for words.

☐ 1- Speaks in single word and short patterns, unable to make connected sentences.

Scale II- Comprehension:

☐ 5- Understands academic discourse without difficulty.

☐ 4- Understands most spoken language except for very colloquial speech.

☐ 3- Understands academic discourse with repetitions, rephrasing, and clarification.

☐ 2- Understands simple sentences, words; requires repetitions, slower than normal speech.

☐ 1-Understands very little or no English.

Scale III- Communication:

☐ 5- Communicates competently in social academic settings.

☐ 4- Speaks fluently in a social academic settings, errors do not interfere with meaning.

☐ 3- Initiates and sustains conversation, exhibits self confidence in social situations.

☐ 2- Begins to communicate for personal and survival needs.

☐ 1- Almost unable to communicate.

Scale IV- Vocabulary:

☐ 5- Uses extensive vocabulary in any domain appropriately.

☐ 4- Uses varied vocabulary to discuss general topics and in special interests.

☐ 3- Uses academic vocabulary, some word usage inappropriate, slightly damages the message.

☐ 2- Uses limited vocabulary, constant use of one word.

☐ 1- Inadequate basic vocabulary.

Scale V- Structure:

☐ 5- Masters a variety of grammatical structures, almost no error.

☐ 4- Occasional grammatical errors but no problem with understanding.

☐ 3- Uses some complex sentences but lacks control over irregular forms.

☐ 2- Uses predominantly present tense verbs, constant errors interfere with
　　understanding.

☐ 1-Severe errors make understanding completely impossible.

Scale VI- Accent:

☐ 5- Acceptable pronunciation, with few traces of foreign accent.

☐ 4- Speaks with few phonemic errors, but almost intelligible pronunciation.

☐ 3- Occasional errors necessitate attentive listening.

☐ 2- Constant phonemic errors make understanding extremely hard.

☐ 1-Severe problems make understanding almost impossible.

APPENDIX 2

Descriptive Statistics Related to EFL Participants' Speaking Fluency Pre-Post Tests results

EFL Context	N	MEAN(out of 5)	SD	t-test
Pretest	40	1.93	.53	_4.453
posttest	40	2.41	.42	

T-observed=-4.453

T-critical=1.671

T-observed bigger than t-critical

Descriptive Statistics Related to ESL Participant'S Speaking Fluency Pre-Post Tests Results

ESL Context	N	MEAN(out of 5)	SD	t-test
Pretest	40	1.75	.55	_0.335
Posttest	40	2.04	.43	

T-observed=-0.335

T-critical=1.671

T-observed smaller than t-critical