



# Mediation in Peer Interaction among Chinese EFL Learners

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## Abstract

*It is widely accepted that classroom interaction, either between peers and a teacher or among learners facilitates students' language learning. An individual learner can benefit from his/her peer(s) who are at higher level of competence through interaction. The most common proposition of the role of peer interaction is the mediation of understanding that helps them develop language competence by noticing the gap. This study examines the strategies adopted by the Chinese undergraduate level learners while mediating the understanding. The data has been generated from peer interaction while doing language classroom activities. In the interaction, the participants attempt to mediate the understanding about the language introduced to them and the activity they were asked to do. The study reveals that Chinese learners of English basically use repetition, first language, elaboration, paralinguistic signs, and contextual and real life instances in order to mediate their understanding.*

**Key words:** *classroom interaction, Mediation of understanding, ZPD, paralinguistic signs*

## Apstrakt

*Široko je prihvaćena činjenica da interakcija u učionici, bilo između vršnjaka ili nastavnika i učenika, olakšava učenje jezika. Učenik kao pojedinac može kroz interakciju imati koristi od svog vršnjaka koji poseduje viši nivo jezičkih kompetencija. Najčešća teza o ulozi vršnjačke interakcije je posredovanje u razumevanju koje im pomaže da razviju jezičke kompetencije primećujući leksičke praznine. Ova studija ispituje strategije koje su usvojili kineski preddiplomski učenici dok su posredovali u razumevanju. Podaci su generisani iz vršnjačke interakcije, tokom jezičkih aktivnosti u učionici. U interakciji, učesnici pokušavaju posredovati u razumevanju jezika kome su izloženi i zadatim aktivnostima. Istraživanje otkriva da kineski studenti engleskog jezika u osnovi koriste ponavljanje, maternji jezik, elaboraciju, paralingvističke znakove i kontekstualne i životne primere kako bi pospešili razumevanje.*

**Ključne reči:** *interakcija u učionici, medijacija razumevanja, ZPD, paralingvistički znaci*

## 1. Introduction

It has been largely evidenced that it is not always the teachers to mediate the understanding among the learners. There are plenty of spaces where the learners can learn from other peers. However, the peer who mediates is believed to have higher level of competence in language. The mediator uses different techniques in order to mediate the

understanding. The techniques they use might differ according to contexts. To be specific, this study attempts to discover the techniques Chinese EFL learners use in particular.

## 2. Defining Mediation

Mediation largely refers to the use of auxiliary objects or tools to execute an activity efficiently.

It is the creation and use of artificial auxiliary means of acting physically, socially and mentally (Lantolf, 2009). These auxiliary resources are used to do our tasks with ease. Such auxiliary tools, in the physical world, include hammers, shovels, dynamites, bulldozers, etc. These tools greatly enhance human capacity to perform tasks with ease and less effort. In particular, we use shovels to dig the ground that makes our job easier than digging with our hand. Here, shovels function as mediators to perform tasks efficiently. Identically, such auxiliary tools are also used in social and physical worlds, in which the tools such as numbers, graphs, models, drawings and linguistic symbols are used for efficient performance. In addition, in communication we broadly use linguistic symbols while interacting with other interlocutors (Lantolf and Throne, 2006, Karpov & Hayward, 1998). In this regard, language is one of the most important symbolic systems for the mediation of human mental activity (Lantolf, 2009).

### 3. Theoretical Orientation

The development of mediation is the core feature of the socio cultural theory (SCT) of Vygotsky (1986). The basic principle of SCT is that all types of human cognitive and emotional activities that refer to learning a language are mediated by psychological tools such as language, signs and symbols (Karpov and Hayward, 1998). To put it other way, when a person interacts with other interlocutors and artefacts, his/her behaviour is mediated by sign/ symbol system (Swain et al., 2011) and (Van Lier, 2000).

Following Oheta (2000), SCT believes that language learners are not only as processors of input or producers of output, they are rather speakers or hearers involved in developmental processes which are realized in interaction. The rate of mental activity goes higher in humans in interactions when they enter into with other members (Lantolf, 2009 and Donato & McCormick, 1994). Watanbe (2008) seems to believe the Vygotsky's (1978) principle that learning comes from social mediation as he also states that knowledge and cognition are built through social interaction. Vygotsky's SCT of mind points out that concept appears through dynamic interaction by shaping and transforming each other in an interconnected system. Consequently, language development is intrinsically a social process (Apple and Lantolf, 1994). Learning a language supports cognitive development in a human being since it mediates interaction between two humans, one with comparative more knowledge to support another person (Vygotsky, 1986).

The next view of SCT believes that language development takes place in the context of collaborative activities (Vygotsky, 1978). Van Lier (1996, p.171) supports the thesis as "in order to learn, a person must be active". Language development does not continue as an unfolding of inborn capacities, rather it is the transformation of innate capacities as they are linked to socio culturally constructed mediational tools (Lantolf and Pavlenko, 1995).

Mediation can be of different types but useful mediation must be linked to learners' zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Lantolf, 2009). ZPD refers to the gap between the real developmental level and the potential developmental level that a learner can achieve

with support from others with higher level in course of interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). This shows that a mediator needs to know what an individual can acquire with support or additional mediation. The ZPD is related to the different

characteristics that a learner possesses and the actual activities the learner undertakes; as a consequence, what is unachievable alone becomes achievable (Lantolf, 2009).

#### 4. Peer interaction

Peer interaction is a broadly used technique in a language teaching and learning that promotes learning by mediating it. It is only myth to say learning does not take place in the absence of experts. Lantolf (2009) advocates that learning does not always emerge from expert, it can even occur in the absence of experts. Dialogues or interaction among learners can be as effective as the instructional conversations between learners and experts (Swain, 1995). In this regard, Lantolf (2009) claims that learners can scaffold each other more efficiently by using interactive strategies that are sensitive to their ZPD.

Stressing on the learning originated through peer interaction, Olmendo (2003) argues that a group member in a peer interaction (as a mediator) can judge the understanding of other peers and facilitates comprehension. They produce scaffolding to other peers to enhance communication and understanding. A language learner can make the most of the affordances (Van Lier, 2000) or occasions for learning (Swain & Lapkin, 1998) that are often made available by the peers in the interaction. Olmendo (2003) suggests the following steps for the participation in the language mediation role in peer interactions.

- a. The mediator must have clue for the communicative intention of his/her peer's speech.
- b. The mediator should be able to monitor the behaviour of the peers to ensure that they have got the message.
- c. The mediator must opt for a strategy that ensures real understanding of the message conveyed.
- d. The mediator should address the peers that strategy.

#### 5. Related Research

A large amount of research has been conducted on classroom interaction, most of which is on a group and pair work. These studies usually focus on the linguistic interactions that occur between the participants of the same group (Long, 1983). Almost all the studies have evidenced their findings in reference to Vygotsky's (1986) theory of cognitive development that basically refers to the knowledge constructed through interactions between individuals within society. The findings of some research have outlined the general strategies that the learners use in mediation while interacting with others.

Olmedo (2003) based his research to investigate the strategies adopted by learners to mediate understanding in English. The study showed that the learners use different types of strategies to mediate understanding such as, translation, paraphrasing, code-switching, scaffolding by providing verbal cues, paralinguistic cues, modelling the behaviour, providing situational cues and interpreting contextual and situational cues.

With regard to peer's assistance in learning a language, Watanbe (2008), in a research on peer interaction, evidenced that both the higher and the lower proficiency peers could provide opportunities for learning when they work collaboratively. Identically, Storch (2002) researched four different patterns of interaction in pair works that include: *collaborative*, *expert/novice*, *dominant/dominant* and *expert/passive*. The findings of the study showed that language learning takes place more effectively in pairs when the activity is done collaboratively or if the interaction is organized between an expert and novice. Similarly, Swain (2000), in his study on collaborative dialogue (the dialogue in which all the learners take active role and engage with each other's ideas), suggested that when learners involve in collaborative dialogues, they complete a task and construct their knowledge. Moreover, Donato's (1994) research also demonstrated that the university level students can collectively build scaffolding for each other's performance in a collaborative interaction.

Correspondingly, Gibbons (2003) focused on the ways how the teachers tend to mediate between the students' present linguistic level in English and their understanding of the content

of the subject through interaction with students. His findings showed that teachers can mediate language learning in a number of ways such as mode shifting through recasting, signifying the need for reformulation, signalling to learners' ways to formulate and recontextualising individual knowledge.

In particular to Chinese context, Gao's (2010, p.69) data supports the argument that "the participants experience of learning English and strategy use were mediated by their interaction with peers, although their learning of English was largely done in isolation". Cheng (2000) as cited in Gao (2010) also finds that in learning process, Chinese students participate in interaction with other English language learners at schools and universities in light of the strong culture for mutual collaboration among other Chinese learners.

## 6. Methodology

### 6.1. Objectives of the study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the strategies Chinese learners of English adopt to mediate understanding while taking part in peer interactions.

### 6.2. Subjects

The subjects of the study were Chinese learners of English who were undertaking undergraduate course in International Business Communication at the Shanghai University of International Business and Economics, Shanghai, China. The study was conducted while those students were taking a short EAP course. Three different groups were formed comprising of lower and higher level learners

and their interactions were observed while they were doing the tasks.

### 6.3. Method

This research is largely based on the primary source of data that was elicited from classroom activities while the participants were attending a short EAP course. As already stated, three specific groups were formed that included both lower and higher level of learners. While they were asked to do classroom activities, primarily grammar based exercises, the interaction between lower and higher level learners was observed without giving any clue to them of being observed. The learners were not informed that they were being observed because they might have acted differently. In other words, Mackey and Gass (2005, p. 187) call this limitation as “The Hawthorne Effect” when the participants act differently upon their knowledge of being observed. This is one of the reasons that the researcher did not opt for recording the interaction, and other being the case that observation is a good tool for gathering in-depth information about activities, interactions, instructions that occur in classroom (Mackey and Gass, 2005). The teacher being the researcher observed the strategies used by the higher level learner while mediating comprehension to the lower level learners. However, it does not seem to be possible to take over the lesson and keep everything noticed in the memory simultaneously. So, the researcher maintained journal writing for four different lessons to draw valid conclusion.

### 6.4. Analysis

This section accounts for the classroom interaction of the students in which they tend to mediate their understanding in various ways. Based on the researcher’s journals, he attempts to analyse the language used by the students in order figure out the strategies that the students used while mediating their understanding. The following are different interactions of the students.

#### Task 1

(Talk to your partner. What was the last plan you cancelled? Why did you cancel it? When was the last time you did something even though you didn’t feel like it?)

#### Mediation 1

Li: What is ‘cancel’?

Lao: Means ....(.....) (Chinese word).

Li: Ok. Um....what I should write?

Lao: Ok...suppose. You had decided to go on shopping and.... it was raining..... but you didn’t cancel your plan.

Li: Ok...I understood.

#### Mediation 2

Yang: Chen ...which language to use?

Chen: Teacher told.....um....language of contrast.

Yang: Con-?

Chen: Contrast. (Modified pronunciation)

Wang: How?

Chen: We can use ‘despite’.

Wang: Oh..like he said.

In the excerpts above, it can be noticed that all the participants work collaboratively to comprehend the task, so it is a collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2000). In mediation 1, Loa has higher level of competence, and so does he try to mediate understanding to Li. At the beginning, the first technique Lao used is Chinese language (participants' first language) to make Li understand the meaning of the word 'cancel'. At the same time, Li asked for clues to write the answer. Lao attempts to explain the task by giving a real life and contextual example.

Correspondingly, in mediation 2, Chen being better known than others mediates comprehension. It can be seen that when Yang is unable to understand the pronunciation, Chen pronounces the word 'contrast'. Chen tends to repeat the word with modified pronunciation to mediate understanding and it works.

As a result, it can be analyzed that Chinese learners of English use the techniques such as first language, repetition, modified pronunciation, and real and contextual examples to mediate understanding.

### **Task 2**

(The students were given a set of corpus data to work on in order to find the pattern and use of the discourse marker 'despite'. They had to find out the patterns that follow and precede 'despite', and to construct sentences based on the patterns.)

### **Mediation 3:**

Kong: What he mean to say follow and proceed despite?

Peng: Ok...um..look at sentence. Which word is before despite?

Kong: Um..use

Zhai: So, this is follow despite?

Peng: Yes, you're right.

Kong: Ok...a recall is follow?

Peng: Yeah.

### **Mediation 4:**

Peng: Have you noticed? ...There is doing word after despite!

Kong: Yeah, you mean 'riding' in sentence 2?

Peng: Yes.

Zai: Then, what is the meaning?

Peng: This is showing contrast.

Zai: What is contrast?

Peng: Um..means .. in contrast to something....opposite idea.

Kong: I didn't understand.

Peng: (.....) (uses Chinese language)

Zai: Oh, I got it.

Having a look at the mediation 3, Kong does not know the meaning of follow and precede in the task. In this concern, Peng tries to mediate the meaning through elaborating the concept by getting their peers to raise their consciousness at the same time. As a result of peer interaction, both Kong and Zhai seem to have understood the meaning. This indicates that their peer is able to offer them opportunity for learning (Wantabe, 2008 & Stroch, 2002).

Next, in mediation 4, Kong asks Peng to tell her the meaning of the term 'contrast'. Initially, Peng tries to mediate meaning by defining the

term but Kong does not seem to understand the meaning. Then, he explains the concept in Chinese language. This reveals the fact that the mediator feels easy to translate into their L1 after s/he fails to mediate through other techniques. However, using L1 is only possible in monolingual classrooms.

Despite they produce grammatically incorrect utterances, they are able to communicate with ease and the mediator is able to mediate the comprehension among his/her peers using techniques such as repetition, first language, elaboration, paralinguistic signs, and contextual and real life instances in order to mediate their understanding.

## 7. Conclusion

The analysis based on the interaction that occurred among the Chinese peers in the class specifies that they use different strategies to mediate comprehension (Olmendo, 2003). The key strategies the Chinese EFL learners use include: repetition, first language, elaboration, paralinguistic signs, and contextual and real life instances in order to mediate their understanding

The results can be interpreted in terms of Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development. These techniques, using language as a cognitive tool to make and shape meaning (Swain,2006), have helped the participants mediate their understanding. The researcher noticed that the participants involved in task collaboratively and co-constructed the understanding, which is also evidenced by the interaction patterns. The knowledge was subsequently appropriated and internalized by the members of the group through mediation. The mediators were able to provide support to their peers during the interaction (Donato, 1994 and Webb, 1989) and to facilitate the understanding to their peers (Olmendo, 2003 and Webb, 1989). To put it other way, they were capable of scaffolding each other quite efficiently using different strategies and learning occurred through those strategies (Lantolf, 2009). More significantly, from a pedagogical perspective, the finding of this study might also suggest that learning seems to take place when students get the opportunity to work collaboratively and a learning strategy that an individual develops while working in group may assist their future learning.

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