Effects of Role Assignment and Proficiency Difference in Low Level Learners’ Pair Interaction in English

Ji-hee Lee
(Seoul National University)
Jin-Hwa Lee∗
(Chung-Ang University)


This study investigated whether role assignment and proficiency difference in pair work affect low level learners’ production and task performance in English. A total of 16 Korean EFL high school students, in dyads of same or different proficiency levels, performed two information gap tasks, one in free interaction and one with role assignment. Their pair interaction was analyzed according to task completion, words, C-units, and interactional modifications. The results showed overall that assigning a dominant role to learners resulted in an increase in their production of words and C-units as well as task completion. The increase was particularly strong among learners who showed passive participation in free interaction. While the influence of role assignment did not differ greatly in homogeneous and heterogeneous pairings, low homogeneous pairs exhibited difficulty in performing tasks. These results suggest that it is possible to facilitate low level learners’ pair interaction by assigning leading roles and pairing them with higher level learners.

Key words: pair interaction, proficiency difference, role assignment

1. INTRODUCTION

The significance of interaction in second language (L2) acquisition is now widely accepted among L2 teachers as well as L2 researchers. Interaction provides L2 learners with opportunities for meaning negotiation, where input becomes comprehensible via input modifications, ultimately contributing to L2 acquisition (Long, 1983, 1996). Interaction

∗Ji-hee Lee: First author; Jin-Hwa Lee: Corresponding author
also enables learners to test their interlanguage hypotheses and collaboratively build knowledge (Swain, 1985, 2000). The beneficial roles of interaction in L2 learning have been robustly tested and generally supported by a number of L2 studies (Gass & Varonis, 1986, 1989, 1994; Hatch, 1978; Long & Porter, 1985; Mayo & Pica, 2000; Pica & Doughty, 1985; Porter, 1986; Varonis & Gass, 1985). A pedagogical implication of these studies is that L2 classroom should incorporate and encourage interaction as much as possible. Given that individual learners can have only limited interaction with the teacher in an L2 classroom, the most feasible type of interaction is interaction among learners. Thus, recently group and pair work has become widespread in L2 classroom, including English classes in Korea.

Despite the potential benefits of interaction in L2 acquisition, however, simply assigning learners to group/pair work does not necessarily guarantee L2 learning. Rather, previous studies have shown that patterns of group/pair interaction vary depending on factors such as task type, proficiency, and gender, and that some of the patterns are more conducive to L2 learning than others (Leeser, 2004; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Storch, 2002; Watanabe & Swain, 2007; Yule & Macdonald, 1990). This suggests that in order for group/pair work to create true learning opportunities, we need to understand the influence of various factors on the dynamics of groups/pairs.

This is particularly so when teaching low level learners. Because of their limited English proficiency and low motivation, low level learners are often isolated or left behind during group/pair work. This becomes one of the major reasons why many English teachers in Korea hesitate to incorporate more group/pair work in their classes. Thus, it is necessary to find ways to facilitate low level learners’ participation in group/pair work by manipulating relevant factors and creating optimal learning conditions.

Probably the most frequently used approach in L2 classroom would be to group low level learners with higher level learners on the assumption that the latter would assist and scaffold the former. According to previous studies, this grouping seems to be beneficial to higher level learners, or at least not to incur any loss for them (Brock, 1985; Lee & Lee, 2011; van Lier, 1996). However, it is an empirical question whether heterogeneous grouping is also beneficial to low level learners’ L2 learning, given that it is often observed that in this situation the higher level learners tend to dominate the interaction, relegating low level learners to passive roles. Also, if low level learners have a tendency to assume a passive role in group/pair work, it would be interesting to investigate whether assigning them active roles could foster their participation in interaction.

In an attempt to facilitate low level learners’ L2 learning through pair work, this study investigated the influence of two factors on low level learners’ pair interaction: interactive role assignment and the partner’s proficiency level. A total of 16 Korean high school students participated in this study and performed tasks in various conditions
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according to proficiency and interactive roles. Specific research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. What is the influence of role assignment on low level students’ pair interaction?
2. Does the influence of role assignment vary depending on the partner’s proficiency level?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Effect of L2 Proficiency in Pair Interaction

How to group L2 learners for group/pair work is one of the crucial issues in L2 classroom, simply because it affects quantity and quality of interaction, which is known as the “interlocutor effect” (Nunan, 1991). Of various factors related to interlocutors, L2 proficiency has been widely used as a criterion for grouping in L2 classrooms. Yet, it has been controversial whether learners can benefit from working with the same level learners or different level learners.

A number of L2 researchers argue that mixed proficiency pairing is more effective than homogeneous pairing in promoting utterances and negotiations of meaning. For instance, Varonis and Gass (1985) reported that when dyads had the most differences in terms of L1 background and L2 proficiency, they showed the highest incidence of negotiation. Storch (2001) also found that for ESL college students’ composing in pairs, the pair with the highest proficiency difference was most collaborative in performing the task.

It should be noted, however, the effect of mixed proficiency pairing needs to be examined from the perspective of each member of a pair separately. For higher level members, Brock (1985) supported mixed proficiency pairing for advanced level learners on the grounds that homogeneous grouping among advanced level learners involves little communication difficulty and therefore few opportunities for meaning negotiation, which is crucial to L2 learning. This is in line with van Lier’s (1996) claim that learners can learn from teaching other peers. In mixed proficiency pairs, advanced level learners are more likely to take the role of teaching less proficient learners and therefore yield benefits for L2 learning. However, not all researchers agree on the advantages of heterogeneous grouping for advanced level learners. Porter (1986) observed that there was little difference in advanced level learners’ lexical and grammatical accuracy when they worked with the same level learners or different level learners, suggesting that advanced level learners are less affected by the partner’s proficiency in their pair/group work. Hill (1982) even argued that it is disadvantageous for advanced level learners to work with lower level learners who
produce ungrammatical expressions.

As far as low level learners are concerned, it is often believed that they can benefit from working with higher proficiency learners. However, it is questionable whether less proficient learners whose L2 knowledge is limited can understand and internalize information from more proficient learners. In relation to this question, Leeser (2004) compared L2 Spanish learners’ performance on dictogloss tasks in three types of dyads: a dyad with two high proficiency learners (H-H), a dyad with mixed proficiency learners (H-L), and a dyad with two low proficiency learners (L-L). In the study, the mixed proficiency dyads produced and resolved language-related episodes (LREs) less than the H-H dyads but more than the L-L dyads, indicating that low level learners can benefit from working with higher level learners. However, a closer analysis of the data for the H-L dyads revealed that lower proficiency members solved only 8% of LREs. In other words, they did not fully make use of the discussion of the L2 by either overlooking or failing to solve problems, probably because of their limited L2 proficiency. Furthermore, Swain and Miccolli (1994) argued that peer learning involves strong emotions, and thus learners can feel pressured or intimidated when working with more proficient learners.

In the Korean context, Lee and Lee (2011) also compared the effects of homogeneous pairing and heterogeneous pairing for high school students’ speaking tasks. In the study, the effect of pairing type was relatively small among advanced level learners, who showed only slightly better performance in homogeneous pairings. On the other hand, intermediate level learners demonstrated notably different performances depending on pairing type and gender. While male students performed better when working with advanced level learners, female students performed better in homogeneous pairs. Based on the results, the researchers suggested that intermediate level learners are more affected by pairing type than advanced level learners. This study indicates that more careful pairing is needed for lower level learners to facilitate their interaction and learning through pair work.

2.2. Roles and Interaction Patterns in Pair Work

Recognizing that not all pair interaction is conducive to L2 learning, several researchers have closely investigated the dynamics of L2 learners during pair work and found that there are various patterns of interaction depending on the roles learners took. After examining pair interaction in a college ESL classroom over a semester, Storch (2002) distinguished four patterns of dyadic interaction based on equality and mutuality, as illustrated in Figure 1. The collaborative pattern describes interaction where both members are willing to offer and accept each other’s ideas with high equality. In the dominant/dominant pattern, both learners actively contribute to the task but do not incorporate each other’s contribution. When one member takes a leading role and the other
takes a subservient role, this is classified as the dominant/passive pattern. In the expert/novice pattern, one member still takes more control over the task, but unlike the dominant/passive pattern, he or she encourages and assists the other member’s participation in the task.

**FIGURE 1**  
A Model of Dyadic Interaction (Storch, 2002, p. 128)

Storch (2002) further investigated the relationship between patterns of interaction and L2 development. The results showed that collaborative and expert/novice patterns of interaction led to better transfer of knowledge than the other two patterns, indicating the importance of the roles and orientations that learners took on in pairs.

Adopting the same framework, Watanabe and Swain (2007) investigated the effects of interactive patterns on L2 learning in combination with proficiency differences between the members of a pair. A total of 12 Japanese ESL students at a Canadian university were divided into three proficiency levels. Each of the four intermediate level students (core members) interacted once with a lower level learner and once with a higher level learner to complete writing tasks. The results showed that the core members produced more frequent LREs when working with higher proficiency partners. Yet the opposite pattern was shown in the post-test scores, where the core members obtained higher scores in interaction with lower proficiency peers, indicating advantages of being paired with less proficient partners for learning. However, the data cannot be explained by proficiency differences alone, because the most and the fewest LREs were produced both by the core-low pairs. The differences between the two pairs were in their interaction patterns. While the pair who produced the most LREs had a collaborative pattern, the pair who produced the least LREs had an expert/novice pattern. Based on the results, the researchers concluded that the collaborative orientation of the pairs had a more important effect on the frequency of LREs.
and post-test scores than proficiency differences.

While the previous studies investigated interaction patterns that naturally occur during pair work, Yule and Macdonald (1990) assigned interactive roles to each member of a pair and examined its effect more directly. They had 40 international graduate students perform a map task in pairs consisting of learners with different proficiency levels. Tasks were performed in two conditions. In one condition, the higher proficiency learner gave directions to the lower proficiency learner (H \( \rightarrow \) L). In the other condition, the lower proficiency learner assumed the role of sender to the higher proficiency receiver (L \( \rightarrow \) H). The results showed that the L \( \rightarrow \) H condition resulted in interaction twice as long as in the H \( \rightarrow \) L condition. Furthermore, the L \( \rightarrow \) H pairs solved 67.5% of the identified problems through negotiation, while the H \( \rightarrow \) L pairs solved only 17.5% of the problems. These differences were mainly due to the roles of each member played in interaction. In the H \( \rightarrow \) L interaction, the lower proficiency receivers took an extremely passive role, contributing little to task completion. They simply acknowledged the sender’s directions by backchannels even when they did not understand them. Sometimes they expressed difficulty in receiving directions, but the higher proficiency senders ignored the problems or abandoned the negotiation. In contrast, the L \( \rightarrow \) H interactions showed more balanced participation of both members and more negotiation of meaning. The higher proficiency receivers frequently used confirmation checks and clarification questions to understand directions offered by the lower proficiency senders. Also, by assuming the sender’s role, the less proficient students could use the language productively to create messages rather than simply responding to them. These data clearly show the benefits of assigning a dominant role to the less proficient learner in a mixed proficiency pair.

Motivated by Yule and Macdonald’s (1990) study, this study investigated whether role assignment and proficiency difference can facilitate low level Korean high school EFL students’ pair interaction. Although inspiring, the findings of Yule and Macdonald’s study cannot be directly applied to high school English classes in Korea because of differences in research settings and contexts. First, the participants in Yule and Macdonald’s study were international graduate students studying at a University in U.S.A., and their “low level students” were indeed high intermediate (TOEFL 500+). Furthermore, their students had different L1 backgrounds and benefited from ESL contexts, which allow them more natural and ample opportunities for interaction in English. It is yet to be shown whether younger and lower level EFL learners who share the same L1 background such as Korean high school learners of English still can benefit from role assignment in pair work. Another significant difference between the two studies lies in their research design. Yule and Macdonald assigned different role assignment conditions to different pairs, ignoring potential differences among different pairs. For a stricter control of unintended variables, this study used a within-group design, where the same pair conducted two tasks under
different role assignment conditions.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 16 second grade high school students who were drawn from two separate classes of a science high school in Gyeonggi-do province. This school is different from other schools in that the students and the school curriculum are science and mathematics-oriented. Other than this characteristic, however, this school is very similar to any other high schools in Gyeonggi-do since all the students’ economic status and level of academics in other subjects such as English vary to a great extent among students.

This school does not adopt level-differentiated English classes, and therefore each class consists of mixed level learners. The participants were recruited considering their English proficiency so that an enough number of low level students, the main focus of this study, could be included.

The participants’ English proficiency was identified based on their English scores of the previous year as well as their English teacher’s opinion. The English scores consist of the results of pencil-and-paper tests and performance assessment of speaking and writing via picture description interviews and essay writing, which were all developed and implemented by the school. Table 1 presents each student’s English score along with gender. Half of the participants were considered low level learners whose English scores ranged from 50 to 72. Although three students (Low (c), Low (e), and Low (f)) had relatively higher scores than other low level students, they were classified as low level based on the English teacher’s observation that their speaking performance notably lagged behind their English scores. In addition to low level learners, six intermediate level students and two high level students were included in this study so as to form mixed proficiency pairs. Their English scores ranged from 77 to 83 and from 95 to 97, respectively. In terms of gender, most of them were male students except for two students. In order to minimize the influence of gender, the two female students were paired up.
TABLE 1
The Participants of the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proficiency Level (Student ID)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>English Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low (a)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (b)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (c)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (d)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (e)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (f)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (g)</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (h)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate (a)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate (b)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate (c)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate (d)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate (e)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate (f)</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (a)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (b)</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2. Task and Materials

According to Doughty and Pica (1986), requiring information exchange is crucial in promoting interaction between dyads. Therefore, the present study adopted two-way information exchange tasks, where the students had to find seven slight differences between two pictures through description of their own pictures and negotiation.

Since each pair performed two tasks, with and without role assignment, respectively, two sets of pictures were needed in this study (see Appendix). Both sets of pictures show the inside of a house, which is a familiar scene to the students. Furthermore, the students already had experiences with picture description tasks as part of their speaking performance assessment in their first course.

In order to check the appropriateness of research design and materials to the level of the students, the tasks and materials were piloted with two students of the same school who did not participate in the main study. No serious problem was identified in the procedure and two sets of pictures were shown to be equivalent in their complexity.
3.3. Procedure and Analyses

First, the students were paired based on their English proficiency, as shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair No.</th>
<th>Proficiency Pairing</th>
<th>Task 1</th>
<th>Task 2: Dominant role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Low (a) – Low (b)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Low (a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Low (e) – Low (f)</td>
<td>free interaction</td>
<td>Low (e)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Inter. (a) – Inter. (b)</td>
<td>free interaction</td>
<td>Inter. (a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Inter. (d) – Inter. (e)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Inter. (d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Low (c) – High (a)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Low (c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Low (d) – Inter. (c)</td>
<td>free interaction</td>
<td>Low (d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Low (h) – High (b)</td>
<td></td>
<td>High (b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Low (g) – Inter. (f)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Inter. (f)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the eight pairs, four pairs were homogeneous and four pairs were heterogeneous in their English proficiency. Since the focus of the present study was on low level learners, most of the pairs included at least one low proficiency student. The only exceptions were Pair 3 and Pair 4, which consisted of intermediate learners only. Their data were used for comparison with performance of the low level homogenous pairs (Pair 1 and Pair 2).

To compare the effect of role assignment, each pair performed two tasks in a row, one without role assignment and one with role assignment. In Task 1, the students exchanged information on their own pictures freely. In Task 2, the researcher assigned a role to each member of the pair in Korean. The student who was assigned a dominant role was asked to be mainly responsible for giving information on their picture and asking information on the partner’s picture. The other member was asked to take the role of information-receiver and answerer. For the dyads with proficiency differences, two pairs (Pair 5 and Pair 6) required a dominant role for low level students, while the other two pairs (Pair 7 and Pair 8) made higher level learners assume a dominant role.

Data were collected by one of the researchers who was the students’ English teacher. Each dyad was called into a separate classroom after all regular classes were over. The students received a brief introduction to the upcoming tasks and performed two tasks in a row. To enhance the students’ concentration on task performance, a five-minute time limit was given for each task. Most of the pairs completed their tasks within the given time. All the interaction was audio-taped and then later transcribed by the researcher.

The transcribed data were analyzed according to four aspects. First, task completion was
calculated by the number of differences each pair found. Since the learners were required to identify seven differences, the maximum score for task completion was seven. Next, to measure the length of utterances, the total number of words was counted per student. Fillers such as um, ah, oh, and Korean words were excluded, and repeated words were counted only once. Also, the complexity of utterances during interaction was measured by C-units. A C-unit is similar to a T-unit, which is defined as a main clause and related subordinate clauses and nonclausal structures embedded in it. The difference is that C-unit also counts elliptical answers to questions as complete predications in oral language (Chaudron, 1988). Finally, the number of clarification requests, confirmation checks and comprehension checks were counted as interactional modifications.

After sharing the coding scheme above, the two researchers coded one pair’s data on two tasks independently and compared the results. While corresponding overall with each other, there was discrepancy in the total number of words and the number of C-units. This was to the second researcher’s lenient counting of repeated words and utterances. After adjusting her application of the coding criteria, the inter-coder reliability between the two researchers on the whole data set was .951 (Cronbach’s Alpha), indicating a high level of consistency and reliability in coding.

Comparison of the learners’ performances across different proficiency pairings and tasks with and without role assignment was made based on relative percentages of each member’s production rather than raw scores, so as to exclude any influence of task differences.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Effect of Role Assignment in Homogeneous Pairing

Table 3 shows the results of the four homogeneous pairs’ interaction with and without role assignment, respectively. Overall, the learners who were assigned a dominant role in Task 2 showed an increase in the relative percentage of words and C-units they produced, when compared with their performance on Task 1. Also, the pair’s task completion improved slightly.
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TABLE 3
Homogeneous Pairs’ Interaction on Task 1 and Task 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair no.</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Task 1 (free interaction)</th>
<th>Task 2 (role-assigned interaction)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>T.C.</td>
<td>Word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>(%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Low (a)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>95(68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low (b)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44(32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Low (e)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>83(40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low (f)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>127(60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Inter. (a)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>124(42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inter. (b)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>173(58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Inter. (d)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>85(28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inter. (e)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>218(72)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. T. C.: task completion; boldfaced numbers are data from the member playing a dominant role.

For instance, Low (e) in Pair 2 produced fewer words (40%), C-units (43%), and interactional modification (43%) than his partner in Task 1. In Excerpt 1 from Task 1, Low (e) mostly took the role of providing information in response to the partner’s questions.

(1) Excerpt 1: Low (e) – Low (f) in Task 1

Low (f): Inside the window, can you see the ghost?
Low (e): Yes, um… When you see the ghost, it, uh… first floor?
Low (f): First floor, three ghosts, then the second floor.
Low (e): Four.
Low (f): Four? I can see five. How many ghosts in the bedroom?
Low (e): Bedroom? Three ghosts.
Low (f): And bathroom?
Low (e): One.

However, when Low (e) was assigned a dominant role in Task 2, his contribution to pair interaction increased, except for interactional modification. This change is manifested in Excerpt 2 from Task 2.

(2) Excerpt 2: Low (e) – Low (f) in Task 2

Low (e): Um… I can see two doors, and left door is open.
Low (f): Okay.
Low (e): Ah… I can see the chair, and there is jacket.
This time, corresponding to the role assigned to him, Low (e) actively described his picture in the absence of information seeking by his partner and initiated questions on the partner's picture. This role change resulted in Low (e)'s increased production in Task 2. Similar patterns were observed in Intermediate (a) for Pair 3 and Intermediate (d) for Pair 4. They showed increases in all the three areas when they played a dominant role. Role assignment also led to better task completion, in that the pairs identified more differences in Task 2.

The only exception was Low (a) in Pair 1, who showed rather a decrease in relative contribution to interaction in Task 2. Low (a) was an active participant from Task 1, as shown in his relatively high production of words (68%), C-units (59%), and interactional modifications (80%). He voluntarily took the role of leading the interaction by asking questions, requesting confirmation, and providing information without being asked. Since he was initially an active participant, when Low (a) was given a dominant role in Task 2, his relative contribution to interaction did not increase. Rather, the percentage of his production decreased, particularly, in word production to 47%. However, this was not because Low (a) was passive in interaction but because his partner actively participated in interaction despite being assigned a passive role. Low (a)'s contribution was still around half of the interaction.

The results of the four pairs seem to suggest a positive influence of role assignment in homogeneous pairing. Particularly notable is the change observed in Low (e) in Pair 2 and Intermediate (d) in Pair 4. They were initially relatively passive participants in Task 1 and produced fewer words and C-units than their partners. However, in Task 2, their contribution increased to an almost equal level or even surpassed that of their partners in some areas. This indicates that assigning a dominant role particularly to a relatively passive learner was effective in engaging them in interaction more actively.

Table 1, however, reveals some concerns about interaction among only low level learners. Regardless of role assignment, the low level learners of Pair 1 and Pair 2 produced only a meager amount of utterances. In many cases, their interaction consisted of short and simple words. This is clear when compared with the intermediate level pairs. While all the four intermediate level learners in Pair 3 and Pair 4 produced over 100 words on Task 2, the highest number of words produced by the low level learners was 67. Furthermore, the low level learners in the homogeneous pairing showed difficulty in performing the tasks, as illustrated in Excerpt 3.
(3) Excerpt 3: Low (a) – Low (b) in Task 1

Low (b): Then... under the sofa.
Low (a): Under the sofa?
Low (b): Bed.
Low (a): Ah, ghost is under?
Low (b): Front
Low (a): Front?
Low (b): Yes
Low (a): My picture is on the um... on the um... like sofa?
Low (b): Um...
Low (a): In bathroom, where is the ghost?
...
Low (a): I can't explain this position.

The two students were exchanging information about ghosts in the bedroom. Low (b) kept changing information on the same object in Lines 1, 3, and 5. In Line 8, Low (a) provided information about the object in his own picture, but Low (b) did not comprehend it in Line 9. Then in Line 10, Low (a) finally gave up on the object and moved to another object in the picture. Yet again in the last line, he expressed difficulty in describing his picture.

The low level learners even pretended that they found all the seven differences when indeed they had not, as illustrated in Excerpt 4.

(4) Excerpt 4: Low (e) – Low (t) in Task 2

Low (t): Ah... I guess your, in your picture, the paint is not opened, isn't it? Not open.
Low (e): I don't know, but maybe, maybe.
Low (t): Finish. We found all seven (in Korean.)

In contrast, the pairs consisting of the same intermediate proficiency students seemed to enjoy the task and seemed to do their best to complete it, as shown in Excerpt 5.

(5) Excerpt 5: Intermediate (a) – Intermediate (b) in Task 2

Inter (a): Um... I have a picture and I will explain about the picture. Uh... there are two doors in this picture, and there are two desk.
Inter (b): Is the two, Are the doors are all closed? or open?
Inter (a): One is open, one is closed.
Inter (b): Left?
Inter (a): Left side of the door is open, right side of the door is closed.
Inter (b): My picture is reversed.
Inter (a): Reversed? Ok, that’s the one difference. There are one chair, left side on the wall. And clothes is hanged on the chair.
Inter (b): Um... that’s same.

Unlike the low level pairs, this pair could deliver their messages and understand the partner’s description without much difficulty or failure, although they still suffered from frequent grammatical errors.

In summary, the homogeneous pairs showed positive effects of role assignment at least for task completion and production of words and C-units. Particularly when passive learners were assigned a leading role, their participation in interaction increased noticeably. However, some concerns were also raised about pair interaction between low proficiency learners regardless of whether roles were assigned. Their interaction was limited in both quantity and quality. They exchanged less information than intermediate level pairs and had difficulty in delivering and understanding messages with each other.

4.2. Effect of Role Assignment in Heterogeneous Pairing

Table 4 shows the results of four heterogeneous pairs’ interaction with and without role assignment, respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
<th>Heterogeneous Pairs’ Interaction on Task 1 and Task 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pair no.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Low (c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High (a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Low (d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inter. (c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Low (h)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High (b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Low (g)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inter. (f)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* T. C.: task completion; boldfaced numbers are data from the member playing a dominant role.
The learners playing a dominant role in Task 2 tended to produce more words and C-units than in Task 1. For instance, while Low (c) produced 37% of the total number of words and 38% of the total number of C-units in Task 1, his production of words and C-units increased to 53% and 45%, respectively, in Task 2. The pair’s task completion also doubled in Task 2. A close examination of the interaction between the two learners suggests that this change is attributable to role assignment. In Task 1, High (a) dominated the interaction and often provided too much information in one turn, as shown in Line 1 in Excerpt 6.

(6) Extract 6: Low(c) – High (a) in Task 1

High (a): Mine is just stand next to the sofa. in bedroom and there are three ghost. One is behind the desk, top of the shelves and behind the desk one. Top of the shelf two. And in front of bed, three. Is there right?

Low (c): In front of bed?

High (a): Yes, not in the bed.

... High (a): What is he doing?

Low (c): Stand on

High (a): Refrigerator? Okay.

The last two lines in Excerpt (6) also show that High (a) hardly waited until the low level student finished his utterance, but frequently intervened in the middle of the utterance. High (a)’s dominance and intervention in interaction resulted in Low (c)’s relatively lower degree of contribution to Task 1.

On the other hand, in Task 2 where the low level student was assigned a dominant role, High (a) showed more patience with the low level learner, as illustrated in Excerpt 7.

(7) Extract 7: Low(c) – High (a) in Task 2

Low (c): Um... so, there is a two doors.

High (a): Yes.

Low (c): In left side of um... the door is open?

High (a): No, I’m reversed. Left is closed, and right is open.

Low (c): Ok, that’s one difference. In left side, there is one chair. There is clothes, hanging.

By assuming a dominant role and being allowed more time to make utterances, Low (c) was able to produce more complete utterances, which led to an increase in words and C-units in Task 2.
Although less dramatic, similar changes were observed in Low (d) in Pair 6, whose production of words and C-units increased from 52% and 50% in Task 1 to 58% and 58%, respectively, in Task 2. In other words, in heterogeneous pairings, assigning a dominant role to the lower level learner facilitated their production and task completion.

The facilitative effect of assigning a dominant role to low level learners in heterogeneous pairing becomes clearer when we examine Pair 7 and Pair 8, where higher level students took a dominant role. In Pair 7, Low (h) produced less than half of the words produced by High (a) in Task 1. His performance was not much different in Task 2 where he still took a passive role. The situation was worse in Pair 8. In Task 1, Low (g)'s contribution (47%) was relatively high probably because of less proficiency difference from her partner, compared to Pair 7. However, when a dominant role was assigned to Intermediate (f) in Task 2, Low (g)'s production of words decreased to 37%. This indicates that in heterogeneous pairs, assigning a dominant role to higher level learners can aggravate their domination of the interaction, leaving low level learners more marginalized.

The results of this study suggest that it is beneficial to assign a leading role to low level learners in heterogeneous pairs in order to elicit more balanced participation in pair work.

5. DISCUSSION

The present study investigated whether role assignment affects Korean EFL high school students’ pair interaction, and if so, whether its influence varies depending on proficiency difference between the members. First, in homogeneous pairing, the learners tended to produce more words and C-units when they were assigned a dominant role than when they were engaged in free interaction. This tendency was observed in both low level pairs and intermediate level pairs.

Similar results were obtained from interaction between low level learners and intermediate or high level learners. To assign a dominant role to low level learners made them produce more and longer utterances with better task completion. In contrast, when higher level learners were assigned a dominant role, their tendency to dominate the interaction was aggravated, leaving low level learners more passive and marginalized.

In addressing the first research question, the results of this study overall confirm the facilitative effect of role assignment for low level learners. When they are assigned dominant roles in performing a task, they are more likely to be responsible for and focused on completing the task, which in turn facilitates their participation in interaction. In addition, role assignment can serve as guidelines for both members of a pair during interaction by enabling them to anticipate a partner’s performance and thereby inhibiting one member from dominating the interaction.
Particularly significant in this study is the finding that the influence of role assignment was noticeably strong in learners who had a tendency to remain passive in free interaction. Although still working with the same partner, they produced more and longer utterances simply by being assigned a dominant role. Yule and Macdonald (1990) reported that it is beneficial to assign a dominant role to lower level learners when they work with higher level learners. This is supported by the findings of the present study with heterogeneous pairs. The results of this study further show that not only learners' proficiency but also their degree of engagement in interaction needs to be considered in assigning roles for pair interaction. If two learners work with relatively equal contribution to a task, it might not be necessary to assign them roles. Rather, the results of this study show that role assignment in such a case can break the balance in the two members’ contribution to the interaction. For instance, in this study, the two intermediate learners in Pair 3 had a relatively balanced interaction in their free interaction, but with role assignment one member’s utterances surpassed those of the partner.

If one learner shows only limited engagement in free interaction, however, assigning a dominant role to the learner seems to be helpful in making the pair interaction more balanced, as indicated by Pair 1, Pair 4, Pair 5, and Pair 7. Note that such imbalance in interaction was observed not only in heterogeneous pairing but also in homogenous pairing. This is why both learners’ L2 proficiency and their degree of participation should be considered in role assignment. Given that the rationale for pair work in L2 classroom lies in that L2 learners can receive comprehensible input and have opportunities to produce and test their interlanguage through interaction, one member’s dominance of the interaction diminishes the potential benefits of pair interaction. In this sense, role assignment can be a viable solution to solve the problem.

In addressing the second research question, the results of this study confirm the influence of role assignment regardless of the partner’s proficiency level. Assigning a dominant role to a low level learner resulted in increased contribution to interaction in both homogeneous and heterogeneous pairing. However, some concerns were raised about pair interaction among only low level learners. The interaction in Pair 1 and Pair 2 showed a relatively meager amount of interaction compared with the intermediate-only or heterogeneous pairs. Furthermore, they exhibited difficulty in performing tasks and sometimes gave up during the task. Although assigning a dominant role to one member increased his or her relative production, their overall task performance in pairs remained far from satisfactory, as shown by the extremely low task completion scores in Task 2 (3 for Pair 1 and 2 for Pair 2). This indicates that when learners’ English proficiency is low, they can benefit more from working with learners of higher levels.

It should also be noted that the benefits of role assignment were mostly restricted to the number of words and C-units in this study. Task completion tended to improve along with
role assignment, but for interactional modification, there was no clear direction in its relationship with role assignment. Overall, the learners in this study, regardless of their proficiency and pairing type, produced a limited number of interactional modifications, with an average of 3.5. Furthermore, most of their interactional modifications were repetition of the partner’s previous words as confirmation checks, as shown in Excerpt 8.

(8) Extract 8: Low (a) – Low (b) in Task 1

Low (b): They are on the table?
Low (a): On the table?
Low (b): Um... behind the table.
Low (a): Behind? My picture, in my picture... in table... in table, ghost is in the table.
...
Low (b): Front
Low (a): Front?

This result is in contrast with active interactional modifications observed in Yule and Macdonald’s (1990) study. The overall scarcity of interactional modifications in this study may be partly attributable to the same L1 background of the learners. Although their utterances include many errors at various levels of phonology, lexis, grammar and discourse, they may have enjoyed the so-called “matched interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit” (Bent & Bradlow, 2003), whereby learners with the same L1 background are more likely to understand each other’s L2. Also, the nature of the tasks using pictures in this study may have reduced the necessity of negotiating meaning through more diverse interactional modifications.

According to Ortega (2009), however, in the ideal meaning negotiation situation, rich interactional modification should take place. After interlocutors produce utterances, the partners’ sign of misunderstanding or non-understanding can be a signal to the interlocutors that they need to modify their previous utterances. Using various interactional modifications such as confirmation checks, clarification requests or comprehension checks, they are expected to increase the comprehensibility of their utterances. The process of making tailor-made comprehensible input or learner-contingent \( i + 1 \) not only benefits the partners but also the interlocutors by raising their awareness of certain L2 forms, which is the necessary initial stage for L2 learning (Schmidt, 1990). In the present study, however, this kind of development through rich interactional modifications was not observed. Thus, to make pair interaction more beneficial to L2 learners, it seems to be necessary to teach various types of interactional modification so that L2 learners can actually use them in their conversation. Beyond simply repeating the previous words or utterances as confirmation
check, they should learn how to request clarification, check the partner’s comprehension, and provide recasts.

Finally, there is another factor which was not the initial focus of the present study but seems to have exerted a strong influence on the results: L2 learners’ personality. Although this study did not directly measure the participants’ personality, their general personality traits could be identified by one of the researchers, who, as their English teacher, had observed the students in and out of the classes. In this study, some students showed a strong tendency to lead the conversation in free interaction on Task 1, regardless of their English proficiency. These learners in general have the characteristics of being very sociable and outgoing. Intermediate (e) in Pair 4 was one of them, and he produced almost triple the number of words produced by his partner in Task 1. Low (d) in Pair 6 also shared similar personality traits. While it is typical that the higher proficiency learner tends to dominate interaction in heterogeneous pairings, Low (d)’s contribution was almost equal to and even slightly exceeded that of Intermediate (c) in free interaction. More studies are needed to establish a firm relationship between personality and interaction patterns.

6. CONCLUSION

Studies of L2 interaction have demonstrated that interaction among L2 learners is beneficial in learning an L2. Yet in L2 teaching, it has been quite challenging to implement pair work, particularly with low level learners, mainly because of their limited L2 proficiency and lack of motivation. Thus, it is necessary to find ways to facilitate and assist low level learners’ pair work in L2. To this purpose, the present study attended to the dimensions of task management (i.e., role assignment) and pairing method (i.e., proficiency difference), and found that these two factors affect low level learners’ L2 production as well as task completion. Low level learners tended to perform the task better and produce more English when they were given a dominant role and worked with a higher level learner.

The results of this study have several pedagogical implications for pair work in L2 classroom. First, assigning specific roles to each member rather than leaving them to choose roles on their own is recommendable, particularly when one of the members dominates the interaction. This is often the case when the pair consists of learners of different proficiency levels or personalities. As shown in this study, in the absence of role assignment, the learners with outgoing personality or a higher proficiency level tend to dominate the interaction. This can result in marginalization of relatively shy and low level learners during pair work, which diminishes the value of pair interaction. The present study suggests that when these passive learners are given a dominant role in pair work, they
become more responsible for the task, which can lead to longer utterances and better task performance. At the same time, the naturally more dominant learners tend to control their participation and show more patience with their partner. Altogether, this leads to a more balanced participation by the two members. Role assignment is not always necessary, however. If the two members are relative equal in their interaction without any intervention, there is no need for role assignment. In this case, role assignment can result in disturbing the balance.

Second, this study suggests that low level learners can benefit from working with higher level learners. The low level learners showed more difficulty in performing tasks and produced less when they worked with the same low level learners than with higher level learners. Thus, if a choice is available, it might be beneficial to pair low level learners with higher level learners.

Third, it seems to be necessary to teach L2 students various types of interactional modification. Overall, the students in this study showed only a limited number and type of interactional modifications. Their interaction can be richer and more conducive to L2 learning if they can use various types of interactional modifications such as clarification requests, comprehension check, and recasts.

The present study has some limitations which need to be addressed in future research. The data were collected through only one session of the experiment, which was not enough to show whether the observed changes induced by role assignment can be sustained over time. Thus, it is necessary to provide learners with systematic pairing and role assignment for an extended period of time and trace their English development through a longitudinal study.

Another limitation is that the present study addressed the potential influence of learners’ personality on pair work only based on informal observation. Future studies need to directly measure learners’ personalities such as shyness and willingness to communicate, and explore their interaction with role assignment effect in pair work.

Finally, it is necessary to examine learners’ emotional and perceptional experiences when they play an assigned role. Although giving a dominant role to the low proficiency students or shy students seems to be pedagogically effective in promoting their English learning, if it is too much of an emotional burden on them, it can cancel out the benefits of having a dominant role. Higher proficiency students or outgoing students who are assigned a less dominant role also need to be considered because they might have feelings of reverse discrimination. Therefore, relevant further studies need to investigate students’ feelings and perceptions using in-depth interviews or questionnaires, and thereby find ways to maximize the benefits and minimize the side-effects of role assignment in pair work.
Effects of Role Assignment and Proficiency Difference in Low Level Learners’ Pair Interaction in English

REFERENCES


APPENDIX

The Pictures Used in Task 1 and Task 2

1. Pictures used in Task 1

Set 1-A

Set 1-B

2. Pictures used in Task 2

Set 2-A

Set 2-B

Applicable levels: Secondary

Ji-hee Lee
Department of English Education
Seoul National University
1 Kwanak-ro, Kwanak-gu
Seoul 151-745, Korea
Cell: 010-8247-6793
Email: jiheelee2011@gmail.com

Jin-Hwa Lee
Department of English Education
Chung-Ang University