Investigation of Small Group Interaction in a Korean University EFL Classroom

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This paper investigates learner-learner interactions performed by Korean college students. It intends to accomplish two purposes: (a) to provide a clear picture of how learners learn from one another by assisting each other; and (b) to convince Korean college teachers who are skeptical about small group work. Nine interactions in one small group discussion session were recorded, transcribed and analyzed. Along with a cognitive-interaction analysis, a supplemental student opinion survey was also conducted in order to provide students’ perspectives towards small group discussion activities. The results showed that learners were able to assist one another in various ways, such as correction, negotiation moves, and lexical assistance. Lexical assistance was the most common strategy. More than 70% of peer assistance was taken as repair and the rest as needs-repair. Mis-correction/mis-assistance was very rare and the uptake rate of this was also low. The survey revealed that two advantages of small group work were, (a) gaining competence in speaking in English and (b) increasing comprehensibility of the content by sharing with others. The students’ most serious concern was missing mistakes, and their main suggestions were to rotate group members and to have a proficient learner as a discussion leader in a group.

(200 words).

I. INTRODUCTION

Since Korea’s Seventh National Curriculum adopted a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach which underpins learner-centered learning, small group work has been encouraged in English learning classrooms, from elementary to college level in Korea (Seonghee Choi & Jeongsoon Joh, 2002). However, student-centered learning has not been fully integrated into English classrooms, due to the country’s long-lived
teacher-fronted learning/teaching style. A new paradigm, especially if it is different from the educational and cultural backgrounds in a country, appears to be slow to impress itself on teachers and administrators. Based on my teaching experiences at tertiary level institutions for several years, I have learned that many Korean English instructors still have doubts about small group discussion activities. They are concerned that there might not be much to gain from learner-learner interactions because the students are all non-native speakers (NNSs) of English and therefore deficient in English language skills. They think that a teacher-fronted class will be better for Korean students’ L2 learning. Teachers who already believe in small group work also want to know to what extent learner-learner interactions are beneficial to L2 learning. There being both skepticism and belief among teachers, what we really need at this point are descriptive studies—among Korean students at all levels and in various contexts—which look from the inside at small group activities performed by English learners. In other words, we need to uncover what is really happening while students with limited English proficiency interact with one another.

To date, three survey studies have been completed regarding either students’ or teachers’ attitudes towards small group work in Korean EFL contexts. Seonghee Choi and Jeongsoon Joh (2002) investigated Korean middle and high school English teachers’ perceptions of and their practices in small group activities through surveys and interviews. They found that teachers generally had a positive attitude about small group activities. For example, 86% of the teachers wanted to use small group activities in the future. Yoon-Hee Soh (2000) investigated intermediate level college students’ beliefs about small group work. Findings indicated that: (a) students felt most comfortable working with three or four other students (56.5%), followed by working as a pair (48.7%); (b) they felt positive about working with students at either similar or higher levels (69.8% and 74.3%, respectively); (c) they preferred not to work with the same members all the time (69.2%). Hye-ryong Hahn (2003) also surveyed low-level college students’ attitudes towards small group work. She found: (a) 66.9% of the students answered that working in small groups is more interesting than working alone; (b) 73.9% of the students answered in favor of practicing speaking in small groups rather than in front of the whole class.

Little research has been conducted on small group work in Korean EFL classroom settings, and that research mainly consists of survey studies related to either students’ or teachers’ attitudes. Besides, according to Hancock (1997), most studies on learner-learner interaction have focused mainly on learners from different L1 backgrounds. Accordingly, in order to understand what is really happening, we need more descriptive studies which look from the inside at small group work in Korean EFL contexts with shared L1 background. Thus, this descriptive study intends to accomplish two purposes: (a) to provide a clear picture of how learners learn from one another by assisting each other; and (b) to convince Korean college teachers who are skeptical about small group work.
Therefore, this study aims to answer the following four research questions:

1. Does collaborative learning take place during small group work in English reading courses? If so, what are their distributions?
2. What is the uptake rate--overall and in each category--for peer assistance?
3. What is the rate of mis-correction or mis-assistance?
4. What are students’ perspectives towards small group discussion activities?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Teacher-Led vs. Small Group Work

Several studies have been conducted comparing small group activities with teacher-led activities. Many of them have proved that learners use the target language more in small groups than in teacher-led activities. Long, Adams, McLean, and Castanos (1976) compared pair discussions with teacher-led discussions among intermediate adult ESL learners. They recorded, in the two situations, discussions on similarities and differences between man and other animals. The findings revealed that learners in small groups produced significantly more speech and used a wider range of speech than those in teacher-led activities. In other words, learners in the small group setting showed positive effects in terms of quantity and quality of their language output.

Pica and Doughty (1985a; 1985b) investigated the same issue among low intermediate ESL learners. They compared teacher-directed work with small group work using a decision-making activity which considered family planning for the future. Findings revealed that (a) students’ productions turned out to be similar in terms of grammatical accuracy in both conditions; (b) conversational adjustments such as clarification requests, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks occurred more during teacher-fronted interactions (11%) than during small group work (8%), but these checks were not frequent. The reason was thought to be the nature of task. The researchers argued that a decision-making task might not have been an easy context in which learners might confirm or clarify meanings or check their understanding (e.g., Doughty & Pica, 1984); (c) in terms of individual input and production, significant differences were observed between the two conditions. They found that individual learners took turns more, produced more target language and received more feedback from peer learners than in the teacher-fronted discussions.

Pica (1987) reported on a similar study with low intermediate adult ESL learners. She compared two conditions: a decision-making discussion task and an information-exchange task. Findings showed that teacher-directed participation generated a smaller amount of
modified interaction in both the decision-making discussion and the information-exchange task. Learners in small groups produced significantly more interactional moves, such as clarification requests and confirmation checks. Interestingly, with respect to interactional modifications, the information-exchange activity resulted in a four-fold increase, compared to the decision-making activity. As mentioned by Pica and Doughty (1985a, 1985b), the nature of the classroom activity itself can be another moderating variable of learners’ interactional modifications.

Rulon and McCreary (1986) also found an interesting phenomenon related to the nature of tasks. They investigated NNS in advanced academic English courses at a university in America. After seeing a video lecture on the American Revolution, learners in both small group and teacher-fronted conditions were asked to complete a two-way task--completing an outline by listing and discussing the advantages and disadvantages experienced by the colonists and the British during the American Revolution. Findings revealed that content confirmation checks and content clarification requests occurred significantly more in the small-group settings than in the teacher-fronted pattern. The authors commented that the nature of the task might have induced learners in groups to generate more content-related negotiation when they were asked to discuss the content of the lecture.

Bejarano (1987) compared cooperative learning with a whole-class method among junior high school EFL learners in Israel. Learners using the former method made significant improvements on a general English proficiency and a listening comprehension test. In general, these studies have proved that small group work is more effective than a lockstep class in developing learners’ L2 language. Students produced more target language, received more feedback, and practiced a wider range of language functions in small group situations. General findings in comparison studies between small group and the lockstep class have demonstrated that (a) a small group setting was more effective in inducing learners to produce their L2 quantitatively and qualitatively. Small group work appeared to have a positive effect on learners’ L2 development since it offers a more desirable atmosphere for practicing their imperfect language, whereas a teacher-directed class provides less opportunity for social interaction due to the unequal status between the teacher and students in the classroom; (b) along with differences in classroom participation patterns, the nature of the task also appeared to be a variable for learners’ interaction (e.g., Pica, 1987; Pica & Doughty, 1985a, 1985b; Rulon & McCreary, 1986); (c) in the case of grammatical accuracy, students performed at the same level regardless of classroom participation patterns (e.g., Pica & Doughty, 1985a, 1985b).

2. Learner-Learner Interaction

Comparison studies between small group work and teacher-fronted classes appear to
confirm that small groups promote learner-learner interaction. Research findings on learner-learner interactions have also supported the claims made for small group work. The findings revealed that interlanguage interactants are as capable as native interlocutors of providing input and inducing pushed output during interaction. In learner-learner conversation, increases in the amount and various types of speech production in meaning negotiation are two of the most attractive features produced because they play important functions in L2 language learning.

Varonis and Gass (1985) compared learner-learner talk with NS-learner talk and NS-NS talk among adult ESL learners at a university. They found that learner-learner talk produced more frequent negotiations than the other two types of dyads. Interestingly, some studies have shown that learners’ proficiency can be a variable in generating input, feedback, and output. Pica et al. (1996) compared learner-learner interactions with NS-learner interactions among low intermediate ESL learners. Their findings indicated that the input, feedback, and output which learner-learner interactions induced was not limited compared to NS-learner interactions. However, in terms of the number of modified inputs (ways to conform L2 morphosyntax), the learner-learner interactions were lacking compared to their counterparts. In other words, learner-learner data was less rich for L2 learning than NS-learner data in terms of its quantity. However, their study proved that, regardless of the source of interaction (NS or another learner), learner-learner communication could assist L2 language learning. Interaction with another learner is not linguistically harmful.

Garcia-Mayo and Pica (2000), however, revealed different findings when they investigated these two types of interactions among advanced EFL learners. They compared dyad interactions between NS-learner and learner-learner. Advanced learners were capable of providing as much modified input as their NS-learner counterparts. In other words, in the case of advanced learners, the learner-learner dyads were not significantly different than they were in NS-learner interactions in generating input, feedback, and output. Advanced EFL learners in this study could provide a richer source of modified input, compared to the low intermediate ESL learners in Pica et al. (1996).

Shehadeh (1999) also compared NS-learner and learner-learner interactions. All NNS learners in his study were enrolled in an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) program for their postgraduate studies. Thus, they appeared to belong in an advanced level. He found that the learner-learner dyads produced more other-initiated modified comprehensible outputs than the NS-learner dyads. Although we need more studies in this area, it seems that the quality of learner-learner interactions improves as learner proficiency increases (Ortega, 2007).

Iwashita (2001) compared the effect of learner proficiency (mixed-level and same-level dyads) on interactional moves and modified output. She compared learners of Japanese at
three proficiency levels (high-high, low-low, & high-low). She found more interactional moves in mixed level dyads than in same level dyads; however, the results were not statistically significant. She attributed this to the narrow interval between high and low level proficiency. Porter (1986) also pointed out interesting findings regarding learners’ proficiency. She compared learner-learner and NS-learner interactions between two levels (intermediate & advanced) using problem-solving tasks. The results showed that learners at both levels were able to help a partner in similar ways to those their NS counterparts used. With respect to mixing proficiency in dyads, learners received more and better quality input from advanced learners than from intermediate learners. In general, high-level learners made them practice more and get better quality input, whereas same level learners did more repair work. In terms of production, learner-learner dyads generated more talk and more practice in prompting than the NS-learner dyads.

Another hot issue in learner-learner interaction has been accuracy of production and correction among learners. One pervasive concern about learner-learner conversation was fossilization of errors, since the learners were imperfect in L2. Several studies have been carried out regarding this matter and have proved that learner-learner interactions did not seem to result in linguistically harmful effects (Bruton & Samuda, 1980; Buckwalter, 2001; Garcia-Mayo, 2005; Williams, 1999).

Bruton and Samuda (1980) investigated error treatment in small group discussions among adult ESL learners at a university. They found that learners were able to correct each other using various error treatment strategies. Learners corrected different types of errors such as lexical, syntactic, pronunciation, and understanding, with the lexical items being the most frequently corrected. Williams (1999) examined learners in a listening-speaking class at a university with four levels of proficiency. Findings indicated that learners do not generally attend to linguistic aspects of language and they often focus on lexical matters. Buckwalter (2001) reported on a qualitative study of dyadic discourse among university students learning Spanish as a foreign language. She found that collaborative repair and unsolicited other-repair were mainly focused on lexicons. As one of the main reasons for learners’ frequent repair of words, she mentioned that FL learners may have less difficulty understanding each other than ESL learners in terms of pronunciation and intonation, due to their shared L1 backgrounds. With a little different perspective, Garcia-Mayo (2005) observed the difference in completion between learner-learner and NS-learner dyads among advanced EFL learners in a university in Spain. She found completion was more frequent in learner-learner interaction than in NS-learner dyads (9.2% vs.0.73% out of total utterances, respectively). Again, the completion made by peers was mainly about lexical items.

Overall, the existing body of research appears to indicate that learner-learner interactions are more beneficial than harmful to L2 learning, since these interactions offer
ample opportunities to practice the target language while students work collaboratively. The frequency of other-correction and completions by learners is not significantly different from the frequency with NS interlocutors. Both tended to repair lexical errors. Accordingly, there is no reason to be concerned that learner-learner interactions may be harmful in L2 language learning, as learners are not likely to miscorrect and, even if they do, incorporation of miscorrection was very rare.

III.  METHOD

1. Participants

A total of 24 students who were taking a college English reading course participated in this study. It was one of the first-level course among five levels of English reading courses at a university in Korea. The participants were from all grade levels and various majors of both genders. Their ages ranged from 20 to 26. Most students did not have study abroad experiences, except for one student who had stayed for a few years in America when she was young.

2. Data Collection: Interactive Discourse & Opinion Survey

Students taking this course were required to read several graded books, that is, simplified storybooks for L2 learners. After reading multiple chapters or a whole book, students discussed in small groups. Small group discussions were employed as a way of facilitating students’ understanding of the content and enhancing their general fluency through practicing expressions, vocabulary, and linguistic features acquired from the reading. In this context, a frequent source of feedback came in the form of peer assistance.

In the present study, one group discussion session was analyzed. As one of the activities in the class, students were provided with a couple of discussion questions after reading a storybook, *Gone with the Wind*. After forming a group with either two or three peer members, they were asked to discuss two questions sharing their opinions and feelings about the story: (a) Compare Rhett and Ashley. Whom do you prefer: who do you think is more interesting to you and why? (b) You are a Confederate soldier returning home at the end of war. How do you feel? (e.g., about the North, the South, the fighting etc.)?

The small group interactions were comprised of six triads and three dyads who were tape-recorded by unobtrusive devices (their own MP3 recorders) during a regular class period. In order to record their classroom work without making them uncomfortable or self-conscious and before actual recording for the study, the students were given a couple
of chances to record their interactions so they could listen to their own discussions. They were informed that the recordings would not be part of their grade. The discussion activity was just one case of the same kind of small group work they had been doing in every class period. The average interaction length was around 11 minutes.

In addition to the students’ performance data, in order to supplement the quantitative analysis of the discourse, their perspectives on small group work were elicited through an opinion survey taken at the end of the course as part of course evaluations. Generally, studies on the effects of small group work are discussed, either from the researcher’s or the teacher’s perspective. Although views of the researcher and the teacher are important, learner perceptions are another important aspect that needs to be taken into consideration. Learning is something students do; thus, the success of small group work is closely related to how they themselves feel about it (Liang, Mohan & Early, 1998). In the survey, I used a broad open-ended question in order to draw the students’ thoughts towards small group discussion activities, that is, “What are your opinions about small group discussion activities?” In total, 24 students in nine interactions all participated in the written survey. As part of the course evaluation, students were asked to provide their perspectives toward small group activities anonymously at the end of the semester. They were asked to write their opinions relative to small group discussion, i.e., (a) advantages, (b) concerns, and (c) suggestions.

3. Analysis

This study describes how learners learn from one another while interacting by assisting and collaborating. In order to do so, nine interactions from six triads and three dyads were transcribed. I repeatedly listened to the students’ recordings in order not to miss any relevant instances. Various types of benefits are categorized and counted in the study, based on typical analytical practices of interaction from a cognitive-interactionist perspective (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Panova & Lyster, 2002). Instances of corrections (in lexis, grammar, and content), negotiation moves, and lexical assistance were examined and presented. The frequency of learner uptake was also inspected. In addition to peer assistance and uptake, a student opinion survey was analyzed in order to learn their perspectives on small group discussion activities since their views are as important as teachers’ perceptions about activity in the classroom.

About five to seven instances were found for each group where students corrected each other, negotiated for meaning (went through collaborative learning to deal with communication problems), and helped each other express their intended messages. Those collaborative learning episodes were transcribed, described, and counted. During transcription, enough context for each episode was presented, along with CA (conversation analysis) transcription symbols, in order to help readers study the discourse more precisely
Taxonomies of peer assistance were created referring to Panova and Lyster (2002), Lyster and Ranta (1997), and Ortega (2009). The definitions of corrections, negotiation moves, and lexical assistance were reformulated or adapted according to my data, in order to describe the given data precisely. For example, with respect to two different types of negotiation move, the definition of “clarification request” was adapted from Panova and Lyster (2002) and Lyster and Ranta (1997), and the definition of a “confirmation check” was reformulated from Ortega (2009), in order to fit my data. In the case of uptake (repair & needs-repair), relevant taxonomies were adapted from the coding system in Panova and Lyster (2002) and Lyster and Ranta (1997), except for “no repair,” which I created due to the needs of the situation.

1) Correction

Three different types of correction were discovered in the data.

(1) *Correction of a lexical error* refers to a correction of words provided by a peer.

1N: Ashely also know the truth of the war like Rhett but  
2 he didn’t do anything like Rhett he only  
3 just going to war the war and and fight with the Yankees  
4J: → Ashley I think Ashley is confu?  
5Y: → yes too confused  
6J: he don’t know anything um even if his love and  
7Y: and he think he think about the honor only like dream

(2) *Correction of a grammatical error* refers to correction of grammatical mistakes provided by a peer.

1K: you would be very hungry ((laugh softly))  
2L: and despair.  
3K: um but despairable or  
4L: on the other hand, I think this is  
5 → the chance of earning money  
6K: → chance to earn money  
7L: → ok (.5) because um:::  
8K: ah- everything is broken >right now<

(3) *Correction of content* refers to correction of the discourse (story) provided by a peer.

1J: he is very poor  
2N: → I could lost all thing before before the war  
3J: → after war  
4N: uh after war
2) Negotiation Move

Two types of negotiation moves were revealed in the data.

(4) Clarification request refers to a listener asking for help to clarify his/her non-understanding in either comprehensibility or accuracy in pronunciation, lexis, grammar, and content, caused by either a speaker or a listener. It includes a word/phrase such as “What,” “What do you mean,” “Excuse me,” or “I’m sorry?”

1O: I think I like Rhett better because uh talking
2 talking about Ashley he is very foolish honest, um:
3H: → what what
4Y: Ashley is foolish and honest
5O: yeah
6H: foolish ah foolish and honest >ok ok<

(5) Confirmation check refers to a listener being unsure whether s/he understood the message (content) correctly. It includes a word/phrase such as “You mean…” “That’s what you mean to say?” or “.. right?.”

1P: he cared so what I mean so, e e everybody
2 another people blame her because because of
3 her greed and her bad act but he didn’t care
4L: we think so
5C: → so whatever she does he still loves her right?
6P: yeah
7C: that’s what you want to say?
8P: ◦yeah◦

3) Lexical Assistance

Three types of lexical assistance emerged in the data.
(6) *Elaboration through lexical assistance* refers to a situation where the other interlocutor comes to the help of the speaker and adds to the idea with some additional lexical items, as a supportive move, without the speaker having requested assistance or even having looked like s/he needed assistance.

1N: because after the war (. ) there was nothing in our
city (. ) everything is ruined (. ) so we might
feel great sadness and memory of past will hurt us.

4C: → and helpless.

5N: → and helpless.

6I: yes and we have to↑

7N: uh um↑

8I: uh:: have strong mind to uh::

(7) *Assistance triggered by a word search* refers to a situation where the other interlocutor provides a word/phrase when a speaker looks for it intentionally, using hedges, sound stretches, repetitions, and perturbations.

1K: but I think she didn’t know that she thinks
2 she loves Ashl she loves Ashley but I think
3 she always think about Rhett
4 cause Rhett is: (.5) um very uh::
5J: → a- attarac- attrac
6K:→ attractive person
7J: um I also I think Scarlett was attracted to Ashley
8 because Ashley was her uh: friend boyfriend lo::ng time (. )

(8) *Translation* refers to where the other interlocutor provides an English word/phrase followed by a speaker’s solicited or unsolicited use of his/her L1.

1K: uh- Ashley doesn’t give up Scarlett even though
2 he he get married to Melanie, and he: so he makes
3 Scarlett confuse, so I prefer Rhett. what do you think?
4C: → * um* I think * um* I prefer Rhett because, * um*
5 → Rhett is the um very solcik
6 → frank
7K: → *frank*
8C: → * um* Rhett is very frank um he (.5) he he love um
9 Scarlett and he (.5) he nev- never give up Scarlett.

4) Uptake

Students’ uptakes are analyzed based on the classification, which is derived from their
data, as shown in Table 1. Uptake refers to a student’s utterance that immediately follows a peer’s assistance. It was further divided into two categories: repair and needs-repair. Repair means “the correct reformulation of an error as uttered in a single turn and not to the sequence of turns resulting in the correct reformulation; nor does it refer to self-initiated repair” (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 49). Needs-repair means a learner’s uptake has not resulted in complete and accurate repair although s/he responded to a peer’s negotiation move to some extent (Panova & Lyster, 2002).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repair</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td>refers to an initial speaker’s repetition of a peer’s feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporation</td>
<td>refers to an initial speaker’s using the correct form produced by a peer in a longer utterance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-repair</td>
<td>refers to self-correction by an initial speaker who produced the error, after being prompted to self-correct by the interlocutor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer-repair</td>
<td>refers to peer-correction produced by a student, other than the one who made the initial error, and after he or she failed to self-correct when prompted or given the opportunity to do so.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Needs-Repair</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>refers to a simple “Yes,” “Yeah,” “Okay,” or “Uh uh”’ as the student’s response to the peer’s feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial repair</td>
<td>refers to uptake that includes correction of only part of the initial error.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No repair</td>
<td>refers to a speaker’s continuation of his/her talk ignoring the feedback.</td>
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VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Quantitative Analysis

The first research question asks what types of collaborative learning moves take place and how they were distributed. As seen in Table 2, three broad categories of assistance emerged in the data comprising a total of 52 cases throughout the nine groups. As mentioned in the analysis, five to seven instances were found within each group, so each type of peer assistance was distributed randomly across the groups and amongst individuals within each group. Of these, lexical assistance was the most frequent, with 31 out of 52 cases (60%).
The second research question was to what extent learners uptake--overall and in each category. Repair and needs-repair were distributed randomly across individuals in all groups. Overall, 73% of peer assistance was taken as repair and 27% was taken as needs-repair, as shown in Table 3.

Looking at each category, correction occurred relatively less frequently, compared to the other two categories. Twenty-five percent of correction was taken as repair and 75% was taken as needs-repair. Sixty-nine percent of negotiation move was taken as repair in which most cases (eight out of nine) belonged to self-repair. Thirty-one percent was taken as needs-repair. The most common form of peer assistance belonged to the category of lexical assistance. Eighty-four percent was taken as repair either in the form of repetition or of incorporation, and 16% was taken as needs-repair, mostly in the form of acknowledgement.

The third research question was to what extent the learners made erroneous corrections or gave erroneous assistance. In general, as shown in the corrections of lexical errors (2 cases) and lexical assistance (31 cases) in Table 4, learners were good at assisting with vocabulary when a speaker was experiencing constraints. In only 3 out of 52 cases did a learner mislead a peer with a miscorrection or an offer of misguided assistance.

The detailed quantitative analysis of the data by category is summarized in Table 4. “Frequency” refers to raw occurrence of corrections or assistance.
As seen in Table 4, eight different types of assistance emerged in the data. Compared to word-related assistance, students were relatively more tolerant toward other types of errors or constraints. One of the reasons may be that, in general, vocabulary carries crucial meaning in the discourse, compared to grammatical or phonological features. Similarly, previous studies have shown that a relatively larger portion of negotiation or error treatment episodes dealt with lexical items (Bruton & Samuda, 1980; Buckwalter, 2001; Garcia-Mayo, 2005; McDonough & Mackey, 2000; Pica, 1994; Williams, 1999).

A second reason may be the task type that the students engaged in. Their discussion was meaning-focused activity rather than form-focused since they were sharing their opinions or thoughts after reading the book. Accordingly, their focus was on expressions of personal opinion and feelings rather than on newly learned linguistic forms. In other words, the pedagogical focus was on improving comprehensibility of the story and enhancing their L2 fluency; thus, the aim of the activity was to maximize their opportunities to interact with one another, enhancing comprehension of the content as much as possible. Conveying meaning was the students’ immediate objective in their conversation. Consequently, errors or constraints that related to grammar or pronunciation were not picked up as often as those in vocabulary, which may be closely connected to conveying intended messages. Seedhouse (2004) and Williams (1999) found that learner-generated attention depends on the nature of the activity the learners are engaged in. In meaning-centered instruction, learners overwhelmingly focus on lexical items and tend to pass over features not related to meaning since these are not crucial to their communication.
Finally, since the students shared the same native language, they tended to be accustomed to grammatical mistakes or phonological accents often associated with Koreans. For example, phonological errors such as pronouncing /f/ as either [f] or [p] are not problematic for them because of their shared understanding. Accordingly, if the phonological errors do not really disrupt the meaning, they are likely to let them pass. For example, in the case of *freedom*, even if Koreans tend to pronounce it as [pridәm] instead of [fridәm], they understand one another because they share the knowledge that English learners of Koreans often pronounce *f* as [p]. In the case of grammatical mistakes, they tend to be tolerant due to similar interlanguage development. Learners in an EFL context may be more accepting of idiosyncratic pronunciations and more understanding of erroneous word choices, because of their shared L1, similar formal educational background, and similar interlanguages (Buckwalter, 2001; Ortega, 2007).

The isolated three cases where learners provided mis-correction or mis-assistance to each other are instructive and for that reason they will be discussed here.

**Case 1. Correction of content**

1N: I came back home then I have I had no money and no slave
2 I lost,
3J: he is very poor
4N: I could lost all thing before before the war
5J: → after war
6N: uh after war
7J: after war
8N: uh uh so so: um: I am very um: frustrated.

Case 1 is interesting in that it was successful in correcting troublesome content; however, in doing so, the other interlocutor made a grammatical error (mis-correction). In line 5, J tried to correct N’s utterance (before the war). J emphasized the word, *after*, (underline means stressed). When correcting the content, J happened to drop the article (the) and in the following turn, N uptakes J’s correction by repeating it exactly. It seems that J happened to drop the article, *the*, because he was focusing on the meaning (the wrong content that N produced). In general, Koreans tend to drop articles because they do not have articles, and in English articles are not much related to conveying meaning.

**Case 2. Correction of a grammatical error**

1L: .hh if I was a Confederate soldier:
2K: uh uh-
3L: I am so hungry cold,
4K: you would be very hungry ((laugh softly))
5L: → and despair.
Case 2 presents a situation where an interlocutor assists a peer interlocutor with an ungrammatical word but the other interlocutor does not accept the correction. In line 5, L completes his previous utterance (I am so hungry cold,) adding “despair.” In line 6, K corrects L’s utterance (despair). It seems that he is trying to make it into an adjectival form, but he adds a wrong suffix (-able). However, as seen in line 7, L did not incorporate K’s mis-correction into his utterance.

Case 3. Assistance triggered by a word search

Finally, Case 3 shows a situation where an interlocutor assists a peer interlocutor with an ungrammatical word and the other interlocutor does accept the correction. In line 3, C looks for an English equivalent by using L1. It seems that he is trying to say that her actions are immature, strange, unpredictable, or fickle; however, he cannot come up with an appropriate word. In line 5, K offers a word (act), which is a direct translation from L1 to L2. If K had considered the context, she should have offered “action” instead of “act.” In line 7, C tries to incorporate the word (act) into his utterance. He uses “action” and switches to “act.” His repetitions and hedges indicate that he is not sure about how the word should be used in that context. It appears that both K and C did not know the noun form of act (action), which fits in that discourse.

In sum, the three cases of mis-correction/mis-assistance can be interpreted as follows: Of these three cases, the first case was not totally mis-correction because the other interlocutor corrected the speaker’s content appropriately. However, he made a linguistic mistake, dropping an article (the). In the second case, the speaker ignored a peer’s repair which was mis-corrected. Thus, peer mis-correction/mis-assistance occurred around 5.7 % and its uptake was around 3.8 % (two out of 52). Previous studies have reported that learners’ mis-correction during unsupervised small group work is not serious. Bruton and
Samuda (1980) found that there was only one case of mis-correction, when a correct form was changed to an incorrect one, during a 10-hour observation period. Porter (1983) indicated that learners mis-corrected only 0.3 % of the errors their interlocutors made. Ohta (2001) showed that peer interactions were not error free, but that the incorporation rate of incorrect utterances was very low. These studies indicate that the benefits of peer interaction outweigh negative effects.

2. Students Survey Analysis

A student opinion survey on small group interaction was analyzed in order to supplement the quantitative analysis of the discourse. Responses were read and categorized based on three themes: advantages of small group work, students’ concerns, and students’ suggestions. Table 5 presents my summary statements of their data. “Frequency” refers to raw occurrence of each type of remark.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students Perspectives Towards Small Group Discussion</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advantages</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It helped them gain competence in speaking English in a comfortable context among peer learners.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It made them share their ideas with others and pick up/learn from their peers parts which they did not understand or catch.</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It made them get to know their classmates better.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It made them work collaboratively by assisting one another.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It made them learn how to speak/discuss in a small group (discussion skills).</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It induced them to participate in the class more actively.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-total response</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concerns</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It is not possible to monitor when they make mistakes due to their lack of English skills.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Those relatively less competent have more difficulties in small group discussion.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sometimes, the given time is not enough to finish the discussion.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-total response</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suggestions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It may be better to have one discussion leader who is relatively more proficient, for the sake of effectiveness.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Having a little tension seems necessary; thus, it might be better to rotate members when forming groups in order to be efficient.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• They want various types of questions: (a) questions not limited only to the content of the book but also related to their lives; (b) controversial issues which may lead to active discussion.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-total response</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to explain the most common responses in detail, I also present relevant excerpts from their data translated from Korean to English. The two advantages that students mentioned most often were gaining competence in speaking in English (14) and enhancing comprehensibility of the content by sharing with others (11). The following are typical responses, related to these two benefits, from the students:

As I started talking in English, I gained confidence in speaking in English. I have learned that having confidence is important in conversing in English since nobody is perfect in a foreign language.

Since the questions are mostly based on the content of the story we read, I could understand the content more clearly by sharing ideas with others.

The students’ most serious concern, although indicated only by six students, was overlooking mistakes. The following is a typical response:

We enjoy having a chance to practice our oral English skills, but since we are still deficient English speakers, we may sometimes use Korean English (Konglish). However, we may not able to correct our mistakes because we all are limited in oral English ability.

Students appear to be concerned with possible negative effects during learner-learner interactions, such as ignoring mistakes, mis-correction, and incorporation of incorrect suggestions. They do not seem to be aware of the fact that interactions can assist their L2 learning whether the interactant is an NS or another learner, as proven in previous studies (e.g., Bruton & Samuda, 1980; Ohta, 2001; Porter, 1983). As Pica et al. (1996) indicated, it seems that they need to be reassured that their interactions with peer learners are not harmful. In other words, they need to be informed that there is no reason to be anxious that their interactions will mislead them or that they are likely to miss-correct/mis-assist or uptake incorrect items from peer learners.

Their main suggestion was about how to choose group members.

As we get used to knowing one another, it seems that we tend to begin to use L1 occasionally and discuss off-topics. So, it might be better to rotate the members in order to have some sort of tension, which may enable us to focus better in our discussion.
In line with this data, Yoon-Hee Soh (2000) reported that, when grouping, the Korean college students preferred rotating members at regular intervals. Another type of response related to this issue is as follows.

Based on my experience, how much I talk seems to depend on what kinds of members the group ended up having. If there is one discussion leader who is relatively more proficient, the flow of interaction tends to be continuous and smooth. So, when forming a group, it is better to have at least one proficient speaker per each group for the sake of efficiency.

Students’ suggestions about grouping appear well aligned with previous studies. Yoon-Hee Soh (2000) also reported that the college students felt positive about working with students at either similar or higher levels (69.8% and 74.3%, respectively). Seonghee Choi and Jeongsoon Joh (2002) pointed out that Korean middle and high school teachers notice that appropriate grouping involves group size and learner levels. Ortega (2007) also pointed out that grouping with mixed proficiency may be the most important strategy in an EFL classroom in order to achieve heterogeneity for efficiency of interaction. Previous studies have shown that this claim is legitimate. Varonis and Gass (1985) showed that learners negotiate more with peer learners who have a different level of proficiency. Iwashita (2001) found that mixed level dyads provided more interactional moves than same level dyads. Storch (2002) suggested that a teacher needs to monitor the groups when dominant/dominant or dominant/passive patterns are present.

Overall, the results of the students’ opinion survey indicate that they feel positive toward small group discussion activities. They provided more comments on advantages (38) than on concerns (10), as seen in Table 5. Their concerns need to be addressed, however, and their suggestions regarding having a proficient speaker for a discussion leader and regarding question types need to be taken into account in order to maximize the effects of group study.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study intended to provide a clear picture for both Korean college EFL teachers who are skeptical and those who believe in small group discussion activities. They were able to assist each other in various ways during learner-learner conversation, through lexical assistance, correction, and negotiation moves. Although learner interactions were not always error free, the rate of mis-correction/mis-assistance was very low and uptake of these was also rare. Besides, a survey of students’ attitudes towards
small group discussion activities was very positive; the benefits of small group work can be maximized if student concerns and suggestions are carefully taken into consideration. In addition to a pedagogical and theoretical rationale and findings of previous studies, this study adds evidence that small group work is worth trying.

As research indicated, small group work can maximize L2 acquisition by offering abundant opportunities for both input and output. By contributing bit-by-bit as a team effort, learners can help build their conversation together. However, group work cannot be a panacea. Poorly planned and organized group work can be as ineffective as badly instructed lockstep lessons (Long & Porter, 1985). What is important is that a teacher needs to decide when to use small group work and when to use teacher-fronted work, depending on the objectives of activities.

As ELT becomes learner-centered, the role of small group/pair work has to be realized in academia as well as in the classroom. However, as mentioned earlier in the literature review, we have no studies of small group work performed by Korean EFL learners, except for a few surveys of teachers’ and learners’ perceptions. In order to maximize the benefits of small group work for Korean EFL learners, clearly more investigation is needed on various proficiency levels and classroom settings, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. At the same time, learners’ perceptions of small group/pair work need to be examined in order to understand how and why small group/pair work benefits them cognitively, linguistically, and affectively (Liang et al., 1998).

First, future research should investigate various levels of Korean EFL learners’ proficiency. Williams (1999) claimed that only at intermediate and advanced level are EFL learners able to carry out extensive negotiation or frequent peer correction. Ortega (2007) indicated that the quality of EFL learners’ interactions in small group work may gradually increase as their proficiency develops. We need to uncover how Korean EFL learners interact at various proficiency levels from low beginner to upper advanced in order to understand to what extent these learners are able to perform small group work.

Second, future researchers also need to look into various classroom settings, from elementary to tertiary schools, for Korean EFL learners. Since the late 1990s, as CLT became the main approach in ELT, small group activities were introduced in the classroom, from elementary to tertiary schools in Korea. However, some teachers are still hesitant to carry out small group work since they do not know how it functions in Korean contexts. We need to investigate small group work among young learners, as well as among teenage learners and among adult learners, in order to check whether small group work will also benefit other age groups in Korea.

Finally, efficient sizes for small group work have to be examined, as well as the advantages/disadvantages of pair work vs. small group work. Which size makes learners produce the target language the most? Foster (1998) found that, for intermediate-level
college students in a UK context, pair work was better than working in small groups of four or five, as students performed to negotiate and to produce modified output. Yoon-Hee Soh (2000) reported that Korean college learners preferred small group work with three to four members, but we do not know anything about the relationship between group size and learners’ production. As Korean EFL teachers become better informed through studies of small group interactions, they will surely have a clearer idea as to why and how they should carry out small group work in their classrooms.

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APPENDIX A
Transcription Symbols

( ) A dot enclosed in a bracket indicates a pause in the talk of less than two tenths of a second.
(.5) The number in brackets indicates a time gap in tenths of a second.
( ( )) A description enclosed in a double bracket indicates a non-verbal activity, for example ((banging sound)).
- A dash indicates the sharp cut-off of the prior word or sound.
: Colons indicates that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound or letter. The more colons the greater the extent of the stretching.
. A full stop indicates a stopping fall in tone. It does not necessarily indicate the end of a sentence.
, A comma indicates a continuing intonation.
? A question mark indicates a rising inflection. It does not necessarily indicate a question.
Under Underlined fragments indicate speaker emphasis.
↑↓ Pointed arrows indicate a marked falling or rising intonational shift. They are placed immediately before the onset of the shift.
<< Degree signs are used to indicate that the talk they encompass is spoken noticeably quieter than the surrounding talk.
>< ‘More than’ and ‘less than’ signs indicate that the talk they encompass was produced noticeably quicker than the surrounding talk.

Applicable levels: tertiary level English education
Key words: small group work, small group interaction, learner-learner interaction

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