Chapter 25
Interlanguage Talk: A Computational Analysis of Non-Native Speakers’ Lexical Production and Exposure

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ABSTRACT
This study investigates the production of and exposure to lexical features when non-native speakers (NNS) converse with each other (NNS-NNS) engaging in interlanguage talk, as compared to when they engage in naturalistic speech with a native speaker (NS). The authors focus on lexical features that are associated with breadth of lexical knowledge including lexical diversity and lexical frequency. Spoken corpora from three types of dyads (NS-NNS, NNS-NS, NNS-NNS) are analyzed using the computational tool, Coh-Metrix. The results indicate that NNSs produce language with significantly greater lexical diversity and higher word frequency (i.e., more common words) when speaking to another NNS than when speaking to a NS. Hence, there is greater breadth of lexical knowledge apparent within interlanguage dyads (i.e., NNS-NNS) than within NNS-NS dyads in the variety of words produced, but not the frequency of the words. There were no significant differences in NNS exposure to breadth of lexical knowledge features as a function of whether the speaker was a NS or NNS. Hence, NNSs were exposed to similar levels of lexically comprehensible input regardless of interlocutor. These findings have important implications for the developmental role of interlanguage talk in reference to lexical production and exposure.

INTRODUCTION
When language learners are faced with learning a second language, they often must depend on other language learners in order to practice speaking and listening skills in that second language. These conversations between non-native speakers (NNS) are referred to as interlanguage talk (ILT; Long & Porter, 1985). Developing a better understanding of ILT has practical importance for second language instruction, particularly with regard to English as a foreign language (EFL) settings where NNSs may not have access to native speakers of English with whom they can practice...
their speaking skills and develop their linguistic competence in natural settings. Such instructional settings are likely the norm, with some researchers estimating that about 80% of verbal interactions in English that involve a NNS do not include a native speaker (NS; Beneke, 1991). Thus, the majority of NNS conversations occur with NNSs pushing NNSs to converse and a reliance on one another to practice and develop their language skills. ILT is also important instructionally with regard to English as a Second Language (ESL) settings where NNSs may have few opportunities to have natural conversations with native speaking English teachers. The scarcity of such opportunities can be partially attributed to the nature of classroom instruction, in which time is limited and teachers’ attention is spread amongst the students in the classroom rather than any one particular student. ILT is thus a crucial element for providing NNSs with opportunities to practice their speaking skills and develop their second language (L2) in the absence of NSs.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the potential benefits of ILT by examining the use of lexical features in NNS dyadic speech, in particular those features that are reflective of NNSs breadth of lexical knowledge. Lexical features such as lexical diversity and lexical frequency are signals of a speaker’s breadth of lexical knowledge because they indicate how many words the speaker knows. These features contrast with those features that are signals for a NNS’s depth of linguistic knowledge (i.e., how well a learner knows a word). Our primary interest in this study is to examine differences in breadth of linguistic knowledge apparent in the NNS’s English language production (i.e., output) when engaged in ILT (NNS-NNS) as compared to when they are engaged in naturalistic speech with a native speaker (NNS-NS). To compare the exposure to language (i.e., input) that NNSs receive, we are also interested in examining native speaker input to L2 learners (NS-NNS) to NNS-NNS dyads. We analyze the potential differences among the dyads using the computational tool Coh-Metrix. Our goal is to examine if lexical production and exposure differs as a function of interlocutor and discuss the implications of the findings for second language acquisition with specific focus on the roles of input and output.

INTERLANGUAGE

Interlanguage refers to the systematic knowledge that comprises a NNS’s second language. An interlanguage is a functional system that differs in accuracy and fluency when compared to the language system of a native language speaker. Unlike a native language, an interlanguage is fluid, demonstrates greater variation, and most likely will never reach a stage of fluency (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Crucial determinants in the development of an interlanguage are input and output.

Input refers to the language to which the NNS is exposed. Generally, NNSs receive modified input from NSs. This modified input is in the form of “foreigner talk” or “teacher talk.” Both forms of input are similar and both are simplified at the lexical, phonological, and syntactic levels to allow for greater comprehension of linguistic features on the part of the NNS (Gaies 1983; Hatch 1983). It is argued that at the level of input, lexical recognition plays the greatest role in comprehension. As a result, comprehensible input is thought to lead to greater lexical acquisition. This contrasts with output, which refers to the production of language on the part of the NNS. Output is argued to force the NNS to move from lexical to syntactic processing and allow NNS the opportunity to experiment with new syntactic forms by testing hypotheses about language structure. When combined, input and output lead to interaction. Interactional theories of language learning hold that the conversational and linguistic modifications found in interactional conversation provide NNSs with the input needed to acquire language (Long, 1983a, 1983b, 1985). Interactional modifications that assist NNSs in