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The Value of Peer Interactions in Second Language Learning

A common belief about second language (L2) learning and use is that it is best done with native speakers or, even better, in the context of study abroad (McGregor, 2016). Many students, and even university professors, attribute authentic use of the language to native speakers (NS) and idealize interactions with them as *the* way to achieve higher levels of L2 proficiency (Lee and Kinginger, 2016). However, L2 learners often have restricted, repetitive interactions with NS interlocutors such as their host families and research shows that they tend to over-rely on classroom discourse (Fernandez, 2016, Lee and Kinginger, 2016). Additionally, conversations with NS may not be natural or cover a variety of topics. While interactions with NS in study abroad undoubtedly have benefits for L2 learners, they are not the only or always the best source for L2 acquisition.

One often overlooked opportunity for L2 use is peer interactions between two L2 speakers, which can provide several valuable benefits to learners. In this study, I attempt to gain better insight into how peers interact abroad outside of the classroom in the L2, and if these interactions are beneficial or different from other types of interactions. To do so, I take an interactionally-grounded approach to the analysis of an interaction between myself and a L2 age peer from China while we were abroad in Leipzig, Germany during the summer of 2016. Early results reveal that my interlocutor and I do not focus on overtly correcting one another's language or giving guidance about grammar or vocabulary, which is usually seen in more classroom like discourse - although we do participate in some talk-about-language (Levine, 2009). Our contributions seem to be more evenly shared and collaboratively constructed, as compared to the more one-sided or passive interactions that we sometimes see between "expert" NS and L2 speakers, which may be due to the disruption of the typical hierarchy and power issues between a NS and L2 speaker to put both speakers on footing perceived as equal. In this way, L2 peer interactions destabilize the power of the native speaker and democratize the language learning process, meaning speakers may be more willing to actively contribute and co-construct interactions and providing a more relaxed environment where more natural conversations are able to take place away from restricted, classroom-like discourse or pressure to emulate native speakers.

In a second project, I am in the early stages of investigating the role that humor plays in mealtime interactions between L2 learners and their host families abroad. Early results support findings that reveal host families approach mealtime as a way to orient students to culinary practices and explore views on taste and food (Kinging, Lee, Wu, Tan, 2014). Additionally, host families often use humor during mealtimes to help socialize learners into L2 use.

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