The role of digital voice recorders in promoting autonomy in beginner ESOL learners

Marcin Lewandowski

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Correspondence

Action Acton,
112-114 Hardy Court, Acton,
W3 8DD,
020 8896 2312
marcin.lewandowski@actionacton.com

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1. Abstract

Ensuring autonomous learning behaviour such as peer collaboration, giving/receiving peer feedback, self reflection and self assessment is fundamental in today’s language classroom. It has been shown, for example, that quality of learner participation in classroom setting is the degree of control the learners exercise over the discourse (Ellis, 1994). This study investigates certain aspects of autonomous behaviour; namely the ability to reflect and give feedback on own and others’ performance and its effectiveness at two different proficiency levels – E1 and E2 (beginners and post-beginners).

Storch (2008) argues that ‘Another, deeper level of attention occurs when learners talk about the language they have produced. This metatalk may deepen the learners’ knowledge about language use, about the relationship between meaning, form and function.’ This kind of attention is thus thought to be at the level of understanding. Swain (1998) argues that by encouraging metatalk among learners, we may be stimulating their language learning processes.

In this study, digital voice recorders were used to allow learners to record their performance on various tasks. They were then asked to listen to their performance reflect on it and give peer feedback where appropriate. Learners were then asked to record themselves performing the same task again. The recordings were subsequently compared qualitatively to see if there was an improvement between recording one and recording two and whether or not learners took on board comments and suggestions made at the reflection/feedback stage.

Early analysis of the data shows that this method is less effective at the lower level, i.e. E1. E2 learners, however, responded very well to this intervention. Learner attitudes to using voice recorders in this way were also tested which suggest that they found the exercise useful and worthwhile. Furthermore, teacher reflections have been included to show the effectiveness of the method from a practitioner’s point of view.

2. Literature review

Encouraging autonomous behaviour in a language classroom is important for a number of reasons; perhaps the most important one is that it allows learners to take responsibility for and ownership of their own learning. The ability to learn independently empowers learners allowing them to take learning into their own hands and enabling them to continue learning outside of the classroom or when the teacher is not present. Allwright (1984) proposes that in order for any lessons to take place at all classroom interaction has to be managed not just by the teachers but also by the learners themselves. He uses the term ‘managers of
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Learning' to describe all parties involved, i.e. teachers and learners. Allwright accepts the fact that most learners will require training in how to become effective managers of their own learning. This however would benefit (...) them outside the classroom, long after the language course itself is over. We may be training them for a lifetime of out-of-class language learning, and it would be missing a great opportunity if we merely trained them to profit from classroom instruction. (Allwright,1984:168)

Experienced teachers will have a number of strategies for promoting learner independence in a classroom at their disposal, from classroom learner centred management techniques such as pair work, groupwork; to setting projects as homework.

Helping learners to reflect on their own performance is another strategy a teacher might use to promote learner autonomy. Reflection on one’s performance with a specific focus on language (e.g. grammar, pronunciation) encourages one to notice one’s strengths and weaknesses. Noticing has been defined as attention plus awareness (Storch 2008). That is, noticing involves registration or detection of a form accompanied by some conscious processing of this form in short-term memory (Schmidt, 1993: 213 in Storch 2008). Subsequent peer discussion about their performance may lead to understanding. Understanding involves a higher level of awareness than noticing because it involves more complex processing in long-term memory and is related to system learning (Schmidt, 1990 & 1993 in Storch 2008).

Storch (2008) argues that noticing is at the level of awareness or consciousness. She posits that another, deeper level of attention occurs when learners talk about the language they have produced:

This metatalk may deepen the learners’ knowledge about language use, about the relationship between meaning, form and function. This kind of attention is thus thought to be at the level of understanding. Swain (1998) argues that by encouraging metatalk among learners, we may be stimulating their language learning processes. (2008:96)

Talking about/discussing language therefore seems to play a key role in language learning. Storch (2008) reports on a study carried out by Qi and Lapkin (2001) in which the authors distinguish two levels of noticing: perfunctory, where the learners simply note the difference between their language and the target language, and substantive noticing, where the learners notice the difference and correct it at the same time verbalising reasons for doing so. The researchers concluded that the quality of noticing may have an impact on second language (L2) learning. That is, noticing without demonstrating an understanding of the nature of the gap in the L2 may not lead to language development. They also pointed at the fact that L2 proficiency may affect learners’ ability to engage in substantive noticing (Storch 2008).

Verbalising was also reported as an important factor in another study carried out by Holunga (1994, reported in Swain 2000) which investigated the effects of metacognitive strategies (predicting, planning, monitoring and evaluating) on language learning. In this study Holunga...
compared three groups of learners working under three different conditions: metacognitive – with training on metacognitive strategies; metacognitive with verbalisation, and a control group – with no training). The findings of this study show that although the metacognitive group performed better than the control group, it was the group in which the participants were instructed to talk about the metacognitive strategies as they implemented them that outperformed all groups on all posttests. Swain concludes that verbalisation helped learners to become aware of their problems, predict their linguistic needs, set goals for themselves monitor their own language use and evaluate overall success. It helped them focus not only on saying but on what they said. This as well as collaborative efforts it encouraged, in turn, supported their internalisation of correct grammar (Swain 2000:109)

This appears to confirm the notion that the social and collaborative nature of the interaction offered by verbalisation engages learners in knowledge building. Villamil and De Guerrero (1996), who in their study explore the strategies learners engage in while working in pairs, draw theoretical support from Vygotsky’s work, state the following: 

Vygotsky (1978) asserts that an individual’s mastery of higher mental functions is derived from social interaction which has been mediated by communicative language. His concept of “zone of proximal development,” which recognizes the importance of peer assistance in the solution of tasks and, consequently, in learning, seems particularly applicable to the kind of collaborative instructional activity that occurs during peer revision (1996: 54).

Elsewhere, Brook, et al. (1997) argue that classroom activities can only become effective if learners are allowed to take control over them for themselves and have opportunities to grow into them. They, too, refer to Vygotsky for whom communication focuses less on the transfer of information and more on how, through speaking, individuals maintain their individuality and create a shared social world during communicative activity. And like Allwright above, they believe that it is not the contents of the lesson or the task that is important, but engagement with and control of communicative interactions that will in the long term benefit the language learner in and out of the classroom (Brook, et al. 1997: 273).

Krashen (e.g. 1981) argues that such monitoring of output i.e. the conscious analysis of the grammar one is producing, is by and large, effective only in as much as when thinking time is allowed, e.g. during writing activities. He believes that in real time this may actually hinder communication. Other researchers believe that such monitoring of output may, in fact, lead to improved accuracy and internalisation of forms which with time become automatic. E.g. according to Lee (2004) to form a correct rule, a speaker has to execute correct sentences related to that rule. This is difficult for a beginner who due to insufficient language may execute erroneous forms and each time the erroneous form is executed the wrong rule will be strengthened in the relevant neuronal circuits. This, in turn, may lead to fossilisation of such forms. Lee (2004) suggests learners receiving instruction are likely to form declarative memories for the grammatical and phonological rules. The learner’s declarative memory will react every time he/she makes a mistake by sending a signal indicating that his or her utterance violates a given rule. This signal may prevent the formation of connections among neurons that could have represented the incorrect rule. Equally, when the learner utters a correct sentence, this information aligns with that of declarative memory, and the
connection that represents the sentence of the rule involved in the sentence may become stronger. (2004: 67).
Thus, it goes to reason that monitoring of one’s output, i.e. thinking about the rule before a sentence is produced, reinforces relevant neuronal circuits which with time should make this rule easier and quicker to retrieve resulting in a more fluent and accurate speech.

On the other hand, Slimani (1989) found that neither learner participation nor negotiating meaning lead to uptake, i.e. what learners claim to have learned at the end of the lesson. What seems to have an effect is listening to other students. Items topicalised by other students rather than by the teacher are most likely to figure as uptake.

It therefore seems likely that encouraging learners to talk about the language they have produced can be used as a valuable strategy for development of learner autonomy and helps them become effective ‘managers of learning’ which, in turn, will have positive effect on their language development.

3. Research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of technology supported (digital recorders) peer collaboration on language development and to answer the following questions:

- To what extent does the use of a simple device (digital recorder) enhance learners’ learning experience?
- To what extent does it lead to improved language performance?
- To what extent are beginner learners of English (E1/E2) capable of scaffolding each other and is this effective?

4. Participants /context

Action Acton Learning Centre is based at the heart of the South Acton estate - one of the largest housing estates in West London. The estate and area is particularly diverse. Historically, the area has been important for Irish working class immigrants, and recently this has been supplemented by Indian, Somali and African Caribbean immigration. Currently the population is 52% white, including 5% of Irish descent, 24% Afro-Caribbean, including a large Somali community, 16% Asian, with the last 8% being of other ethnic origins. A great range of first languages other than English are spoken at the local school. (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Acton,_London accessed on 20/01/10)

Historically, the estate and the area has suffered from a poor reputation, in particular because of high levels of crime, drug dealing and use. However, due to recent efforts by the Council, local Safer Neighbourhoods Team and Ealing Homes (the council’s housing management company) local residents have seen improvements in the area. There are now ambitious plans to redevelop the majority of what is a mono-tenure estate, to provide a new mixed tenure community and benefit from the area’s excellent transport links and proximity to the successful neighbourhoods of Chiswick and Ealing. There is also a high rate of unemployment among the residents of the estate (ibid).
Action Acton Learning Centre has been set up provide free, accessible and flexible Literacy, Language and Numeracy (LLN) learning opportunities and employment support to unemployed and economically inactive local residents. This is to support these individuals with their literacy, numeracy and language skills and enable/empower them to find suitable employment or to deal with everyday situations such as shopping, visiting the GP or communicating with the teachers of their children.

A large proportion of our learners are housewives who come to classes not only to improve their language skills but also to socialise. Many learners have reported that they haven’t got friends outside of their own communities and therefore attending classes gives them an opportunity to use and practise English. Some of the learners come to learn at the Centre because they find it a less threatening environment than large FE colleges; others are here because they couldn’t secure a place at an FE college.

The courses offered at Action Acton Learning Centre are funded with public money - through the London Development Agency or the Learning and Skills Council. They are therefore free to eligible learners. To meet the eligibility criteria learners (participants) have to be unemployed or economically inactive with the right to stay in the UK.

This means that the learners are typically adults, unemployed and representative of the community, most notably, Polish, Somali, Japanese, Indian, Iranian, etc.

The current sample was no exception. Two groups of learners at two different levels (E1 and E2) participated in this study. There were 11 learners in the E1 group and 10 learners in the E2 group. Participants represented 15 countries and spoke 12 languages between them (see table below for breakdown)

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There were 6 males and 15 females in the sample. The mean age of the participants was 37 years with the range from 20 to 79 years. The length of residence varied from 0.5 to 40 years with an average of 4.5 years.

Although all learners were assessed at the start of the course and were placed accordingly, their educational backgrounds reflected their prior academic experiences and thus differed.

Learners attended a 12 week long ESOL course with classes taking place twice a week. The classes were two and a half hours in duration.

The groups were taught by two experienced tutors.

5. Methodology

This study has adopted action research methodology in which researchers (in this case practitioners) engage in an interactive inquiry and reflective practice with a view to address issues and solve problems. This, it is hoped, will enable and lead to personal and/or organisational change.

As stated above the study was carried out in two groups of learners – E1 and E2. There were three data collection points (sessions) over a period of twelve weeks. During each session learners were put in pairs and asked to work on various tasks which at entry level 1 included shopping, health and holidays. At entry level 2 they included talking about the weekend (past simple), discussing the last ten years (present perfect) and discussing holiday plans (going to). Two recordings were made for each pair of learners on every occasion using digital voice recorders. The learners were therefore asked to complete and record the task (R1). They were then asked to listen to their performance and discuss what could be improved. They were asked to write their reflections on paper. Learners were then asked to perform this task again (also recorded R2).

Qualitative comparison of R1 and R2 was carried out to see if there had been an improvement in terms of grammar, pronunciation. In addition to this, the participants’ reflections were analysed qualitatively to see to what degree the participants were able to reflect on their own and their partners’ performance.

Moreover, learners were asked to complete a questionnaire which was designed to measure learners’ attitudes towards the effectiveness and usefulness of using digital voice recorders in the classroom. The responses to the questionnaire were anonymous to allow honest feedback.

The second teacher involved in this study was also asked to reflect on her experiences of participating in this study.
6. Findings

Overall the study rendered mixed results. Very early it became apparent that the E1 students found the exercise of reflecting on their own performance or giving feedback on their peers’ performance difficult due to insufficient language skills. In her reflections the teacher stated:

‘Most students would not say what needed to be corrected because, simply, they did not know. Some were unwilling to say anything because they saw no reason for anything to be repeated at all.’

On the whole, the E1 students admitted that were happy to use the digital voice recorders and found them useful. In the subsequent questionnaire 3 students out of 10 who were able to answer it stated that they were happy to use them, considered them a good aid to improve their pronunciation and said that they could notice their own mistakes. But the number of students who could actually understand the aim of the project and complete the task successfully to the end was very small (3 people out of 11) and even they were unable to self/peer correct, i.e. they could not explain what could be done better in their first dialogue. In her reflections the teacher wrote:

*Unfortunately, the students did not possess enough language with which to do so [correct their mistakes] or could not entirely grasp the concept of the task. They were happy to record themselves the first time, and this is how the task ended in all cases.*

In the E2 group the results were more encouraging. Once the initial issues with the noise level in the room had been addressed, the learners responded to the exercise very well and were keen to participate in the study.

When we transcribed the learner interactions we found that on the whole the second dialogue would always be shorter than the first one. Understandably, given that it was their second ‘go’ at the task, the interactions seemed more rehearsed with turns more succinct and to the point.

The corrections in the second recording broadly reflected the corrected mistakes identified at the self-reflection/feedback stage. For example during the first recording the following exchange took place:

*Kate: ... and I have visited to USA.*

*Amira: what about USA.*

*Kate: I’m an au pair for 5 months*

During the review the learner was able to correctly identify and correct the mistake which resulted in a more accurate use of the past simple tense:
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Kate: (...) I have visited to USA.

Amira: USA is very nice. I like USA

Kate: And me too.

Amira: I would like to go to USA

Kate: I was in USA 5 months.

In addition to listening to and reviewing their performance, learners also took notes of some of the mistakes that they made. Those notes were later discussed and corrections were made. The examples below demonstrate this quite well.

Recording 1

Sadia: Where are you have been in the last ten years.

Sadia's notes from the reflection stage show the following analysis of errors:

? X ?

Where are you have been in the last ten years

to
I have been in Syria
I've come to Syria
I came to Syria

Evidence from Recording 2 shows that Sadia corrected these errors, e.g:

Sadia: So, where have you been in the last ten years?

In another example learners were asked to discuss their weekend. At the review/analysis stage Sadia and Uma noted the following feedback:

Uma:

Sadia’s mistakes...

In the first time record she is very good grammer [sic] but she must to improve her sentence format.

*I did my normal work on Saturday like washing, cooking cleaning.

My fault Uma

Some grammer [sic] mistake —— arrange —— arranged
My husband like to watch Hindi film
likes

Sadia recorded the following feedback

We had a* lunch
I am (was) afraid from dogs
I didn’t go to any place only stay in my house or my flat
stayed at
These corrections were later addressed and used in the second interview.

Learner self analysis feedback also shows greater awareness of own and others’ language performance, e.g.:

Mr. Chin have some problem in using past tense but he speak well. Today I feel my self well. I feel confidence and I feel not much shy but still I can’t complete my sentence at first.

Even though the learner in the above example does not refer to specific grammatical errors, she could critically evaluate her peer’s performance and that of her own. She, therefore, recognised that her peer needed to work on the past simple tense and that she needed to improve her sentence structure. Interestingly and encouragingly, she also noticed an improvement in her own performance with regards to self-confidence which demonstrates that she had become aware not only of her errors but could also acknowledge the progress that she had made.

Another interesting observation is the fact that some learners monitored their language more and self corrected which could have been due to the fact that they were aware of being recorded, e.g.:

Sadia: and I’ve been in Syria, I’ve been to Syria

Sadia: My cousin live... My cousin lives in Spain

The feedback collected with the questionnaires confirms that the participants found using digital voice recorders to review their performance very useful. They were also unequivocal in how they benefitted from this exercise. The responses are analysed below:

8 out of 10 participants in the E2 group completed the questionnaire. All 8 learners said that they found using digital voice recorders useful. When asked to justify their answer, most participants referred to the fact that they could correct their grammatical mistakes, e.g.:

‘we can correct our mistakes’

‘Its helps you to find your mistakes which may be about your grammar your style of speaking and also your speed of using words’

‘because it helps me to hear my own voice and to let me know how do I pronounce the English and to find my mistakes’

‘I could listen my talk with my friend’

‘I could know about my mistake of pronunciation and grammer [sic]’
‘Because I could see my mistake about my grammar’

All participants who completed the questionnaire (8/8) said that they felt they could notice their mistakes. 7 out of 8 respondents felt that they could correct these mistakes. 5 out of 8 respondents said that they could notice their partners’ mistakes. 5 out of 8 respondents felt that they could correct their partners’ mistakes. 7 out of 8 respondents felt that listening to the recordings of their performance helped them think about their strengths and weaknesses.

When asked to make additional comments or suggestions some participants left the following comments:

‘I think it was better to use the voice recorders, because it has helped us to know exactly if we are improving or no about the pronunciation, the grammar and to give us the volonte [encouragement] to talk...’

‘Digital voice recorders are very useful during your course. Its helps you to improve your mistakes because when you speak to other person you can’t find or count your mistakes which are about your grammar, pronunciation and also your speed but when you use voice recorder and after recording when you listen your voice you can better know your whole mistakes. So I can say that voice recorders are very helpful and useful during your learning process.’

7. Discussion

As we have seen above not all learners will equally benefit from this technique. Whilst the response at Entry 2 has been very positive, it has been largely unsuccessful at Entry 1. This confirms the assertion made by Qi and Lapkin (2001 in Storch 2008) that L2 proficiency will affect the learner’s ability to engage effectively in this type of reflective activity.

It is encouraging, however, that at Entry 2, still a relatively low level, learners’ linguistic competency appears to be sufficient to engage in activities where critical analysis of own and others’ performance is required.

In considering the questions that prompted this study and given the evidence discussed above, I would like to offer the following comments:

- To what extent does the use of a simple device (digital recorder) enhance learners’ learning experience? – the responses given to the questionnaire confirm that learners found using voice recorders useful and beneficial. Listening to their own performance allowed them to reflect not only on their performance in a given task but also on the progress they had made to date.

- To what extent does it lead to improved language performance? – the qualitative analysis of the data shows that learners were able to identify and correct some of the mistakes they made. They were then able to use the corrected forms when the task was repeated. Although further research is necessary to ascertain whether or not this initial improvement in performance has been long lasting.
To what extent are beginner learners of English (E1/E2) capable of scaffolding each other and is this effective? – there is evidence (exemplified above) that the participants in this study were able to engage not only in reflecting on their own performance but also to give corrective feedback to their peers.

Another interesting observation that was highlighted in this small scale study is the fact that the second turn would usually be more rehearsed and to the point. There is large body of research which suggests that rehearsing has a beneficial effect on language development. For example, Ellis (2005) refers to Levelt’s model for speech production in which Levelt identifies three autonomous processing stages: 1) conceptualizing the message, 2) formulating the language representation and 3) articulating the message (2005: 11). Ellis suggests that rehearsal may provide an opportunity to attend to all three components in the Levelt’s model and lead to all-round improvements when the task is repeated. Elsewhere, Ellis refers to Bygate’s research (1996, 2001 in Ellis 2005) in which he found that rehearsal enhanced complexity, fluency and accuracy.

Learner autonomy is very important in a language classroom; however, it is also important to be able to strike the right balance between teacher centred approaches and learner centred approaches, e.g. Ellis reports on a study by Wong-Fillmore (1985) who found that the most successful classes for language learning were the ones that made the greatest use of teacher directed activities and, conversely, that classes that were open in their structure and those that made heavy use individual work were among the least successful for language learning (Ellis 1994: 605). I felt that the tasks the learners were asked to complete were quite directed in what they were trying to achieve, for example, practising the present perfect tense. Learners, however, were in charge of the voice recorders and, effectively, timings. This at times led to a somewhat disorganised activity where some learners had already finished and were getting bored while others were still working through the task. Timing of activities will therefore have to be more tightly controlled by the teacher in the future.

While it is clear from the examples above that there is no substitute for teacher’s feedback, particularly at this level, this study also shows that even at relatively low levels of language proficiency learners are perfectly capable of engaging in reflective analysis of their language performance. This could, in turn, lead to uptake and retention of the corrected forms although the durability of such uptake has yet to be tested and could be addressed in future studies. Developing this ability will make our learners more autonomous and empower them to take more responsibility for their own learning; thus helping them to become effective ‘managers of learning’.

Digital voice recorders can therefore be a very valuable tool that will help us achieve this goal. This sentiment is also echoed by my colleague who stated:
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It was good to see that the students enjoyed the recording practice and found it stimulating. It will, I suppose affect my teaching practice insofar as I would use the same teaching technique more often, because the dictaphones are a wonderful tool with which students can check their pronunciation, vocabulary and formation of sentences thus monitoring their progress.

8. Conclusion

The main objective of this project was to find ways to enhance ESOL learners’ learning experience and help them to develop strategies to continue learning independently when they have left the classroom.

The issue that this action research set out to address is quite specific to the way we run our programmes, namely, the fact that our learners attend relatively short accredited courses. This also means that they have to pass an exam at the end of their courses. Often they expect to learn everything in the classroom which is not possible especially when it comes to learning a language. On the other hand many of these learners have very little time to study at home.

It was therefore important that the autonomous behaviour that we wanted to help our learners develop would create opportunities for them to learn from the linguistic input around them, e.g. the language they hear on radio/television. We wanted to achieve this by enabling them to notice and, where possible, address the discrepancies between their interlanguage and the target forms. Ability to reflect on your own and your peers’ performance is a skill that once developed can be successfully used outside of the classroom to do just that.

And I believe we did.

The above results are encouraging and have practical implications for language teachers teaching learners at E2. They demonstrate that learners at relatively low levels of English are capable of reflecting on their own and their peers' performance. They also show that voice recorders can be used very effectively to support and develop autonomous behaviour in our learners. However, it is important that the findings of this study are kept in its specific context, i.e. unemployed, adult learners with their specific goals and reasons for learning the language, attending short language courses. Moreover, the research was carried out on a relatively small sample of learners and the results must not be generalised. Future research could therefore look at larger samples of learners and cover a wider range of teachers. Future study could also look at whether or not the uptake from these activities is durable as well as at the ways in which learners apply this new skill in their lives.
References


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