

Article

A Sociocultural Approach to Interactions among Beginning Learners of Chinese as A Foreign Language: Implications for Teachers of Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages

Rui Bao

Zhejiang Normal University, China

Abstract

Grounded in sociocultural theory (SCT), this study examines interactions among beginning Learners of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL). Through video-recordings of learner interactions during task-based activities, microgenetic analysis of the data indicates that beginning CFL learners draw on mutual assistance, correction, co-construction, and a shared L1 to solve linguistic problems encountered during classroom tasks. Learner to learner interaction leads to a higher level of performance that cannot be accomplished by either of them alone. Also, variations are identified in the interactional process among different pairs. This study indicates that beginning learners benefit from peer interaction during task-based activities. Moreover, it is suggested that this benefit relates to various contextual factors such as individual learner difference in linguistic ability, the characteristics of the target language, task design, and groupings. As such, it highlights the need to consider context when observing the nature of learner interaction. Implications for CFL teaching are also discussed.

Keywords

Sociocultural perspective, the zone of proximal development, learner-learner interaction, Chinese as a foreign language

1 Introduction

With the increasing recognition of the benefits of learner interaction for L2 learning, collaborative activity has become prevalent in many L2 classrooms. The quality of assigned tasks has been seen as a powerful tool in generating this interaction. Earlier research has focused on what types of tasks in what conditions are most effective for interaction (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Polio & Gass, 1998). This line of research, also known as input, interaction, output approach (Block, 2003) perceives interaction as a tool for learners to increase their comprehension of the L2 through various interactional mechanisms, especially in terms of meaning negotiation (Long, 1996). However, this approach has received criticism, as it has been found that during interaction, the learner is doing more than simply negotiating the meaning of L2 input (Brooks & Donato, 1994; Foster & Ohta, 2005). As such, reducing interaction merely to meaning negotiation may have prevented us from having a complete picture of the relationship between interaction and L2 learning (van Lier, 2000).

This limitation has inspired some researchers to examine the exact process between input and output and its links to L2 learning (Donato, 1994; Lantolf, 2000). This line of research is framed by sociocultural theory (SCT) which has its roots in the works of Lev Vygotsky but is developed by his contemporary followers for second language acquisition (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). By emphasizing learning as a socially-constructed process and using collaborative activity as a tool for data collection, SCT-oriented research has demonstrated that learning actually arises in the interaction rather than as a result of it (see review in Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002). To date, this research has been mainly conducted with intermediate learners of English and other European languages in a controlled setting (Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Guk & Kellog, 2007; Ishikawa, 2013; Knouzi, Swain, Lapkin, & Brooks, 2010; Poehner, 2008; Swain, 2006), while little attention has been paid to low-proficiency learners of a different language such as Chinese, especially in classroom contexts.

With the rising position of China on the world stage, Chinese for speakers of other languages (CSOL) has gained in popularity among foreign learners in many countries and regions. Nevertheless, CSOL teaching has encountered a variety of challenges such as low participation, low motivation and high learner attrition rates. These problems have been attributable to the teacher-lecture approach dominant in many CSOL classrooms (Bao, 2012; Bao & Du, 2015a; Moloney & Xu, 2012; Wen, 2009). Efforts have been made to respond to these challenges. For instance, some research has investigated the effects of implementing different teaching techniques for CSOL teaching (Bao & Du, 2015a; Moloney & Xu, 2016). Others have focused on CSOL teacher training and professional development (Singh & Han, 2015). However, results of this research are far from conclusive in terms of which kind of teaching is most effective, as what works well for one group in one context may not work for a different group in a different context (Ellis, 2012). In addition, relatively little research (one exception Bao, 2018) has examined CSOL classroom learning processes, especially in relation to learner-learner interaction. This dearth of material, together with the significance of interaction in L2 learning, highlights the need for more research in this regard.

Against this backdrop, informed by sociocultural theory, the current study attempts to explore the interaction between beginning learners of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) during collaborative tasks. The results are expected to gain a better understanding of how beginning learners of CFL interact with each other so that teachers may make good use of learner-learner interaction as they work to better enhance CSOL teaching and learning. Below, a brief review of the central principles of sociocultural theory and relevant empirical research in L2 learning is presented. What follows next is the methodology of this study, including the context, participants, procedures of data collection, and analysis. Finally, the findings are displayed and discussed, and implications for CSOL teaching and learning are suggested as well.

2 Literature Review

2.1 A sociocultural perspective of interaction and L2 learning

Sociocultural theory (SCT) views learning as a social process in which interaction plays a crucial role. To be precise, knowledge is first constructed by participants in a social activity and is then incorporated into the individual's own possession. Said another way, learning is at first regulated by other people (i.e. other-regulation). As the individual engages in sociocultural activity, he/she gains growing control over his/her mental functioning by appropriating the methods used by more competent learners (i.e. self-regulation) (van Compernelle, 2010). According to Vygotsky (1978), the transition from other-regulation to self-regulation occurs in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is defined as

“The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978:86).

This concept is used to document development or learning. Vygotsky (1978) maintained that, for learning to occur, the gap in the ZPD had to be bridged, which entails the presence of an expert or a more knowledgeable adult who provides assistance by means of various tools, language being one of the most prominent. In this sense, language is not only a communicative tool but also a cognitive tool that shapes and reshapes our thoughts when talking with others. This shaping and reshaping has been defined as ‘*linguaging*’--a process of using language to make meaning and shape experiences, which is seen as an important aspect of learning (Swain, 2006). In addition, the notion of ZPD has also been extended to learner-learner interaction, as learners are also able to pool individual strengths to construct new understandings and meanings for the knowledge under study (Swain et al. 2002). As such, the dialogic interaction generated from collaborative activity can be perceived as a place in which learning is nurtured or forged. It is this perception of interaction and learning that the current study has examined.

2.2 Learner-learner interaction and L2 learning

A number of SCT-oriented studies on interaction have examined learner-learner interactive dialogue during tasks and its effects on learning (Donato, 1994; Brooks, Donato, & McGlone, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). These studies have shown that the dialogue, in both L1 and L2, plays a much broader role in the L2 learning process than merely solving communication breakdowns. By focusing on the impact of using the L1, a few later studies have shown that L1 use contributed to L2 learning in various aspects in terms of helping learners establish a common understanding of the given task; externalizing their inner speech; sustaining verbal interaction; reflecting on their L2 use; managing task procedure; initiating and building up interpersonal relationships with other learners (Algería le la Colina & García Mayo, 2009; Antón & Dicamilla, 1999; Bao & Du, 2015b).

In addition, SCT researchers have also explored how learner-learner interaction contributes to learning. For instance, Donato (1994) analyzed the interaction between three university learners of French when co-constructing a picture-description task and found that through collective scaffolding, the learners were able to assist each other in solving language-related problems and to combine their individual contributions to perform a complex linguistic structure that could not be done alone. More importantly, their co-constructed knowledge was used independently and successfully by individual learners on a later occasion, which indicates that “higher mental functioning is situated in the dialectal processes embedded in the social context” (p. 46). In a similar direction, Ohta (1995) revealed that, in contrast to their limited and passive participation in teacher-fronted interaction, EFL learners who actively participated in pair-work activities provided each other with mutual assistance such as correction, clarification requests, repetition, or regulation. This assistance created a positive learning atmosphere in which both learners were highly engaged, but also enabled them to “act as both experts and novices, constructing their roles through the varying level of expertise they contribute to the interaction” (p, 116). In other words, learners benefit from their collaborative interaction regardless of their linguistic abilities. However, this benefit also depends on the context of the interaction.

Previous research has reported the effect of learner proficiency on the nature of learner-learner interaction. This research has mainly examined learner interaction using language-related episodes (LREs) as a unit of analysis. For instance, Swain and Lapkin (1998) explored the interaction between two grade-eight immersion French students and showed the positive relation between their LREs and L2 learning. Their focus was on the pair of learners with strong proficiency levels, and the variety of LREs produced by that pair suggests that contextual factors were affecting the transactions.

Similarly, by focusing on the quantity and quality of LREs, Lessor (2004) has revealed that the higher proficiency learners have, the more LREs they produced, meaning that lower proficiency learners may have little benefit from collaborative activity. However, Wanatabe and Swain (2007) found that when learner-learner interaction was collaboration-oriented, they would create more learning opportunities regardless of proficiency level. Similar findings are also confirmed by Kim and McDonough (2008). In addition, research has also remained inconclusive in terms of the patterns of pair interaction and their links to learning. For instance, Kowal and Swain (1994) revealed that pairing learners with similar linguistic ability was more effective for learning, whereas the opposite way was true in Storch (2002).

In sum, the above-reviewed research has indicated the benefits of learner-learner interaction for L2 learning and also highlighted the potential impact of context on these benefits. This suggests that learner-learner interaction is context-related. As such, it is unreasonable to generalize the results of this research across contexts, as the existing research focuses mainly on European languages. Therefore, more research is warranted in other contexts. This is particularly so in the context of Chinese as a foreign language, as knowledge about this context is limited. With this in mind, the current study attempts to address this gap by pursuing the answer to the following research questions:

Are pairs of beginning learners of CFL, using peer interaction, able to solve linguistic problems in the ZPD during task-based activities? And, if they can do so, how do they proceed?

3 Methodology

3.1 Instructional context

This study took place in two beginning-level adult CFL classes at a Danish University. Class A was a two-semester oral Chinese course whose participants were majoring in China Area Studies in a Bachelor's Program. Class B was a one-semester extracurricular course, which was organized in the evenings. It was an elective course, which was set up for university students, who had interest in learning Chinese. The textbook for Class A was *Integrated Chinese*. There was no prescribed textbook for Class B; instead, its teaching materials were self-designed by the teacher.

Although with some differences, the two classes did have some things in common. First, they shared their teaching objectives by focusing on oral skills. Second, the two classes were taught by the same teacher, who was a native Chinese speaker and was also the researcher of this study. Third, the instructional process was similar in both classes. The instructions consisted of two sections: teacher-led activity focusing on vocabulary practice and grammar explanation, and pair work in which learners performed tasks to practice what had been instructed. English was used as the instruction language, especially for grammar explanation or task management.

3.2 Participants

Fifteen participants were enrolled in Class A and ten in Class B. Their age ranged from twenty-two to thirty years old. With the exception of one participant in Class A, who was from Lithuania but had a near-native proficiency in Danish, participants were all native Danish speakers. None of them had prior knowledge of Chinese or any other exposure to Chinese after class. All of them were treated as beginning learners, who studied Chinese mainly in the classroom. They met twice a week for three hours, with a total of ten weeks in each semester.

3.3 Data collection

Prior to data collection, permissions were obtained from the institutions and from the individual participants. Data was collected in the two aforementioned classes. Two learner pairs from each class were randomly chosen for recording at each teaching session. To this end, a small video camera was placed on the table in front of each pair. Of note here participants were not paired as a fixed interactant entity. Instead, they worked with those seated nearest to them. Therefore, the pairings might be different at each lesson.

Tasks used in both classes were all performed orally, aiming to develop learners' oral skills by practicing the target structures and vocabularies in Chinese. The topics of these tasks were related to four themes: greetings, family, times, and hobbies. Because of different requirements in both classes, tasks used in Class A required a wider range of words and grammatical items than those in Class B. There were three types of tasks used in both classes: information-gap tasks in which each learner held part of the information and had to exchange it in order to complete the task; role-play tasks in which learners in pairs presented a dialogue according to the written instruction; interview or survey tasks in which learners were required to ask personal information from their partners related to the given topic. The time it took to complete each task was around 10-12 minutes on average.

Given that learners may not have been accustomed to pair work and the presence of the video cameras, the recording from the first teaching session was excluded. After taking a close look at the remaining recordings, some of them yielded no usable data due to the poor sound quality resulting from the overlapping conversations inherent in an on-going classroom. As such, the recordings from five lessons in each class, totaling two hours, were analyzed for this study. Table 1 displays specific information about the paired learners and the tasks.

Table 1

Pair Participants and Tasks in This Study

Class A	Pair Participants	Task	Class B	Pair Participants	Task
Lesson 2	Dn-Sl	Information gap	Lesson 5	Md-Hd	Survey
	Pr-Wl			Sl-Kl	
Lesson 3	Ak-Ck	Information gap	Lesson 6	Md-Kl	Survey
	Am-Tl			Sm-Lb	
Lesson 4	Ak-Ck	Survey	Lesson 7	Md-Hd	Information gap
	Dn-Hm			Sl-Kl	
Lesson 6	Ck-Bp	Interview	Lesson 8	Hd-Lb	Survey
	Cm-Yb			Sl-Kl	
Lesson 7	Ck-Bp	Role play	Lesson 10	Md-Hd	Interview
	Dn-Sl			Sl-Kl	

3.4 Data analysis

The video recordings were transcribed by the researcher. Transcription conventions are presented in the Appendix. Learners' utterances in Chinese were transcribed into pinyin with tone markings. Pinyin is a phonetic system used to represent the pronunciation of the Chinese language. Given the focus of this study on capturing the process of learner-learner interaction, the transcripts in which learners asked for assistance from the teacher were excluded, though this happened frequently.

Analysis focused on the interactional processes between paired learners specifically looking at the following: 1) how paired learners interacted with each other to solve language-related problems in order to complete the given tasks; 2) whether this interaction led to any development in the learner's ZPD. To this end, microgenetic analysis was used, as it enables researchers to observe moment-to-moment changes in learners' L2 ability, such as learning a word, sound, or grammatical feature of a language (Lantolf, 2000). These changes, from a sociocultural perspective of learning, are indicators of learners' developing L2 ability within the ZPD (Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2013). In the findings section, participants are identified by the two letters extracted from their Chinese name in pinyin (Chinese phonetic system).

4 Findings

The qualitative analysis showed interactional processes related to mutual assistance, correction, co-construction, and the use of the L1 that beginning learners of CFL deployed to solve language problems encountered during task completion. Due to space limitations, the analysis of the selected excerpts related to each mechanism is presented individually below.

4.1 Mutual assistance

Mutual assistance was a process in which peer learners assisted each other to work out the task being discussed. Data analysis identified abundant instances of this assistance through which learners successfully solved their L2 problems. Excerpt 1 illustrates how the use of mutual assistance helped learners to understand and ultimately produce the target form that may not have been accomplished without this assistance. In this excerpt, the two learners were working on a task which required them to exchange information in Chinese to fill gaps in the task.

Excerpt 1 (Lesson 3 in Class A)

1 Ak: tā shì shén guó rén nej

Where is she from no (incorrect)

2 Ck: tā shì nǎ guó rén ?

Where is she from

3 Ak: hvad?

what

4 Ck: tā shì nǎ guó rén? Det betyder hvor er du fra

Where is she from? It means where you are from

5 Ak: Ja, og er det så meningen at man skal sige 'nǎ' eller hvad?

Yeah and then you're supposed to say 'where' or what

6 Ck: nǎ guó rén for eksempel hvis du siger amerikaner měiguórén eller dān m...

Which country person like for example if you say American or Danish...

7 Ak: dānmài rén men hvis jeg så spørger dig, hvor hun er fra – jeg forstår bare ikke den del.

Danish people but then if I ask you where she is from, I just don't get this part

8 Ck: which country are you from? (English)

9 Ak: Ja, det er rigtigt, men så vil jeg starte med at sige tā shì og hvad kommer så bagefter?

yeah that's correct, but then I would start saying he is and then what's coming afterwards?

10Ck: nǎ guó rén
 where are you from 11Ak: kun det?
 just that?

12Ck: ja
 yeah

13Ak: okay tā shì nǎ guó rén?
 Ok where is she from?

14Ck: yeah oh tā shì nǎ guó rén
 where is she from?

15Ak: så det er hvor hun er fra.
 so it's where she is from

In the exchange, Ak first rejected his self-initiated L2 utterance in line 1. It seemed that he realized that something was wrong and thus decided to seek an evaluation or assistance. The correct form was provided by the other learner in line 2, which drew Ak's attention and prompted his clarification request, 'what' in line 3. This request not only made Ak hear the target form again, but also received a direct translation in line 4, which was powerful, as it made Ak notice the word 'nǎ' used in his partner's utterance, followed by a confirmation check in line 5. This resulted in a further detailed deconstruction of the target form meaning 'where are you from' in Chinese, which was revealed in lines 6-12. The exclamation 'ok' was the externalization of Ak's full understanding, as noted by his fluently uttering 'tā shì nǎ guó rén' in line 13. He corroborated his understanding by repeating it in his L1 translation. At this point, Ak's Chinese competence was growing with his partner's assistance. Likewise, Ak also assisted Ck to reach the correct structure, as shown in excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2 (Lesson 3, Class A)

1Ck: tā shì yíge shì jiějie
 she has one sister (incorrect)

2Ak: Nej nej du siger 'hun er' men du skal sige 'hun har' ah
 no no you say 'she is' but you have to say 'she has'

3Ck: ah tā yǒu jiějie
 ah she has one sister

Here, in response to Ck's non-target utterance, Ak overtly rejected (no) and made direct correction to Ck's utterance, following the provision of a solution in line 2. The exclamation 'ah' in line 3 indicated Ck's self-awareness of his error and his acceptance of Ak's correction, immediately following his self-correction in the target production.

The two excerpts showed that learners deployed a variety of strategies to assist each other to solve linguistic problems. Besides, learners were also able to link the new linguistic items with their existing knowledge to help another to better understand the L2.

Excerpt 3 (Lesson 7 in Class A)

1 Bp: Hvordan udtaler du xué?
 how do you pronounce xué?

2 Ck: xué
 to learn

3 Bp: xué
 to learn

4 Ck: xuéshēng det kommer fra xuéshēng
 student it comes from student (the same pronunciation)

5 Bp: ok

In this exchange, Bp was struggling to pronounce the Chinese word 'xué'. In line 3, he mispronounced this word again, although Ck had said it in line 2. To help his partner better understand how to pronounce 'xué', Ck made a connection between 'xué' and 'xuéshēng' in line 4. The exclamation 'ok' in line 5 indicated Bp's recognition of this connection, probably because the word 'xuéshēng' sounded familiar, since it has been taught at the beginning of the class and used in almost every lesson.

In addition, learners also showed each other affective assistance during task completion. In excerpt 4, the two learners were frustrated in trying to recall how to say a number in Chinese.

Excerpt 4 (Lesson 2 in Class A)

1Pr: dì yī ge øh hvad hvad...

The first one eh what what...

2Wl: øh ja det er lige som øh ja dì wǔ ge fem wǔ vi skal bare putte fem derind lige som 'dì'

Eh yeah it's like eh yeah the fifth five we just put five in there like 'dì' and then put the number in there

3Pr: wǔ jeg kan ikke huske alt det...

five I can't remember all of these...

4Wl: ingen problem det gør ikke noget

no problem, it's okay

5 Pr: dì wǔ ge

the fifth

6 Wl: ingen problem, det gør ikke noget.

they fly around in my head too

In this exchange, both learners had difficulty in producing the Chinese number needed for the task. In line 2, Wl heard Pr struggling and directly assisted him by providing the whole phrase and a detailed explanation of how to structure it, although he mispronounced the number 'wǔ'. However, this structure seemed too complicated for Pr, as he nailed the pronunciation of 'wǔ' and then overtly expressed his inability to complete this utterance, following a pause in line 3. Rather than explaining further, Wl showed his sympathy and understanding in line 4 (no problem, it's okay). Interestingly, with this affective support, Pr successfully produced the target structure on his own in line 5. In this sense, this emotional support also seemed helpful for learners to achieve a level of performance that may not be done alone.

4.2 Correction

Correction involves paired learners correcting each other. Analysis of the data showed that correction mainly occurred in two ways: self-correction and other-correction, both of which helped learners to perform a higher level of function in the ZPD. In excerpt 5, Md provided two corrections on Hd's grammar and pronunciation, respectively.

Excerpt 5 (Lesson 10 in Class B)

1 Hd: yeah eh nǐ de shēngrì eh qī

yeah eh when is your birthday? (incomplete)

2 Md: shì

is

3 Hd: shì jǐ yuè

is which month

4 Md: jǐ

which

5 Hd: jǐ yuè [jǐ hào?

when?

6 Md: [jǐ hào yeah wǒ de shēng rì shì eh èryuè... èr shí wǔ hào

which date yeah my birthday is on 25th... Feb

In this exchange, Hd was asking his partner's birthday in Chinese. In his productions, two errors emerged at two different places: in line 1, where he misused the word (qī) in his incomplete utterance, and in line 3, where he mispronounced the word 'jǐ'. The two errors were immediately corrected by his partner in lines 2 and 4. Significantly, Hd successfully incorporated these corrections in his continued productions. Moreover, he correctly pronounced the same word needed for the rest of the target utterance in line 5, indicating that he had moved toward a higher level of performance in the ZPD. In addition, learners also frequently self-corrected during the interaction, as shown in excerpt 6.

Excerpt 6 (Lesson 4 in Class A)

1 Dn: tā mèimei shì xuéshēng

is her sister student? (incorrect in the pronoun)

2 Hm: Ja

yes

3 Dn: oh nej tā wǒ nǐ (pointing at Hm) nǐ mèimei shì xuéshēng ma?

oh no is her my your your sister student?

This short exchange showed that learners refined their language use through self-correction. In line 2, Hm uttered 'yes', which indicated that she did not recognize Dn's non-target utterance by misusing the pronoun 'tā' and omitting the question word 'ma' in line 1. However, the exclamation 'oh' externalized Dn's self-recognition of her errors, as was evident by her uttering (no) after her successful self-correction and the production of the complete target utterance in line 3. However, it is important to note that there were very few episodes focusing on pronunciation correction, though the pronunciation errors appeared in abundance. Reasons for this were discussed later.

4.3 Co-construction

Co-construction was adopted from Foster and Ohta (2005), which refers to the collaborative process of allowing learners to participate in forming utterances that they cannot complete individually, building language skills in the process (p.420). As shown in the data, individual learners during tasks did not dominate the interaction, but rather contributed in different ways to construct the target form by drawing upon their own linguistic resources. Excerpt 7 was one such example.

Excerpt 7 (Lesson 10 in Class B)

1 Kl: 'time to get up' ok det er qǐchuáng qǐchuáng

'time to get up' ok it is get up get up

2 Sl: hvad?

what?

3 Kl: qǐchuáng

to get up

4 Sl: āh ja

oh yes

5 Kl: men jeg kan ikke huske hvordan

but I don't remember how

6 Sl: hvordan?

how?

7 Kl: Er det bare nǐ qǐchuáng nej tiden

Is it just you get up no the time

8 Sl: Jeg kan ikke engang huske spørgsmålet

I don't even remember the question

9 Kl: måske vi også skal sige wǎnshang til at starte med, det betyder om morgen

perhaps we also need to say in the evening at first that's in the morning

10Sl: Ja lige præcis men her er 'chīfān' det er hvad du spiser om morgenen

yeah exactly but here is 'to eat' that's when you eat in the morning

11Kl: Ja

yes

12Sl: Så må det være zǎoshang jǐdiǎn nǐ øh 'get up' hvordan gør du

So it must be in the morning what time do you eh 'get up' how do you

13Kl: her

here (pointing to the word on the paper)

14Sl: Ja det er 'qǐchuáng' ligesom du sagde

yeah it is 'to get up' like you said

15Kl: zǎo zǎoshang jǐdiǎn [nǐ qǐchuáng?

what time do you get up in the morning?

16Sl: [nǐ qǐchuáng?

[You get up?

This exchange illustrated how the two learners co-constructed how to say 'what time do you get up' in Chinese, an utterance that initially could not be accomplished by either of them alone. Kl provided different, but necessary, resources needed for this production. She first contributed the correct word 'qǐchuáng' through her self-correction in line 1. Then she denied her own hypothesis but immediately added another important piece of information (the time) in line 7, and further suggested the need for another time word, although she failed to select the appropriate one in line 9. The exclamation 'yeah' in line 10 externalized the other learner's acceptance of these segmental resources provided by Kl. The following assertion (exactly) indicated that Sl found the solution to their common problems, although she still had difficulty in finding the appropriate time word in the same line. Finally, by synthesizing her own resources and the resources provided by Kl, Sl confidently started to produce the utterance, but then struggled again with the word 'get up' in line 12. With Kl's contribution of the word, both learners arrived at the target form in lines 15-16.

4.4 The use of the L1

In the data, there was abundant L1 use, which played a wide range of functions in helping learners solve the problems encountered during task completion. These functions were summarized into two categories: metacognitive talk, which focused on task procedure, task management, or learners' emotional reactions (Algería le la Colina & García Mayo, 2009); and metatalk, which learners used to reflect on their L2 productions and regulate their mental activity as well as the language resources they drew on to perform tasks (Brooks et al., 1997). The two functions were not independent of each other, but were interwoven during the exchange, as shown in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 8 (Lesson 7 in Class B)

1Sl: og så antallet af din familie

and then the number of your family

2Kl: Ja

yes

3Sl: den svære del

the difficult thing

4Kl: det er noget med ge rén men jeg glemmer bare hvordan man spørger ní...

It's something with persons but then I forget how to ask you...

5Sl: ní [jiā yǒu]

your family has

6Kl: [jiā yǒu] ge rén eller?

how many person are there in your family or ? (incorrect)

7Sl: Jeg tror vi mangler et ord i midten ja ja

I think we are missing a word in the middle yes yes

8Kl: oh yeah ní jiā yǒu jǐge rén?

oh yeah how many persons are there in your family?

9Sl: eh wǒ jiā yǒu sì gerén

eh there are 4 persons in my family

This exchange showed that with the help of the L1, learners accomplished the target form 'How many persons are there in your family?' in Chinese. First, in lines 1-3, the L1 was used to establish the common goal at this point of interaction, and then to make metalinguistic comments on this goal. Speaking in the L1 regulated the cognitive process that Kl used in seeking a solution to the goal in line 4, where she contributed the important component (*ge rén*) in this target form, but also expressed her inability to produce this entire utterance by only using the first word (*ní*) and pausing in the same line. Continuing from this, Sl successfully produced the main structure (*ní jiā yǒu*) for the target form in line 5, which was supported by Kl, as was evident from her overlaps in line 6. Importantly, Kl extended this overlap to complete the rest of the target form following her L1 (*or*), which indicated her uncertainty and openness for an evaluation. In line 7, the use of the L1 allowed Sl to further reflect on Kl's utterance by tentatively pointing out a missing word, and verifying her reflection, as was evident by her uttering 'yes' twice in the same line. This reflection was reasserted by Kl with her exclamation 'oh yeah', followed by the appropriate production of the target form. Here, L1 use helped learners in regulating their cognitive processes of constructing L2 meaning and reflecting on their L2 productions, leading to the successful production of the target form.

To further illustrate the role of the L1, excerpt 9 showed that L1 use also created a relaxed and cooperative learning atmosphere.

Excerpt 9 (Lesson 10 in Class B)

1 Hd: zhōumò nǐ xīhuān zuò shénme?

what do you like to do at weekend?

2 Md: zhōumò wǒ xīhuān dǎqiú nummer tre jeg går bare ud fra at der menes sport generelt hé kàn diànshì

At weekend I like to play balls number three I just assume that's sport in general and watch Tv

3 Hd: du har da noget at vælge i mellem

you have something to choose between

4 Md: ja ja jeg har været sød imod dig

yeah yeah I've been nice to you

5 (both laughing)

Here, learners were doing a survey on each other's daily activity by using a list of new words and target forms. However, incorporating these words into their L2 productions might be challenging for learners, as the L1 utterances used by Md in line 2 indicated his own strategy for how to use these words in his production. Hd, however, misinterpreted this strategy as his partner's limited access to the words for expressing himself by suggesting 'you have something to choose between' in line 3. The exclamation 'yeah' externalized Md's self-awareness of his opportunity to use these words, but what he did was just for his partner's interest, as was evident by his joke (I've been nice to you) in line 4. This joke made both learners laugh in line 5, thus leading to a relaxed atmosphere.

In addition, the results showed that when paired learners had unequal L2 abilities, it was often difficult for them to work in tandem when performing tasks. In excerpt 10, Md, who had strong linguistic skills, got annoyed by Kl, who had weaker skills and failed to keep up with what Md had produced after three trials.

Excerpt 10 (Lesson 6 in Class B)

1 Md: wǒ bàba de shēngrì shì qīyuè sānshí hào sǎ

My father's birthday is on 30th July so

2 Kl: Ja øh...April

Yeah eh...April?

3 Md: Ja

Yeah

4 Kl: og så siger jeg...kan du lige gentage det?

and then I say...can you repeat it?

5 Md: eh sānshí hào

eh 30th

6 Kl: øh fireogtyve er det ikke eh

twenty-four is that no

7 Md: sānshí

30th

8 Kl: Åh treogtyve...eh sān tre

Oh twenty-three well eh...eh three?

9 Md: Ja tre sānshí tredive og så siger jeg ikke mere for det er kun tredive

Yes, three sānshí thirty, and then I won't say anymore because it's just thirty

10 Kl: Ok spørgsmål ok nǐ nej så er det tā bàba

Ok question ok you no then it's his father

11Md: Hvis du introducerer mig så skal du sige tā bàba de shēngrì shì qīyuè sānshí hào

If you're introducing me you have to say his father's birthday is on 30th July (both laughing)

12Kl: tā bàba de shēngrì āh nej helt ærlig jeg er ikke særlig god idag

his father's birthday holy crap I'm not any good today well

In this exchange, the two learners were carrying out a survey about the birthday of each other's family members. Md fluently uttered the birthday of his father in line 1. Nevertheless, this utterance was challenging for Kl, who took four turns by confirmation check, requiring repetition, and hypothesis to figure out the meaning of Md's utterance in lines 2-8. This jagged process seemed to irritate Md, as he confirmed what Kl had checked by repeating 'sānshí' after his firm refusal to say it again (I won't say anymore because it's just thirty) in line 9. This rejection showed his impatience with constantly repeating the same number for his partner. In line 10, the exclamation 'ok' was the externalization of Kl's decision to put it aside and move on to the next, followed by uttering the rest of Md's utterance through self-correction. Md provided another explanation, accompanying a repetition of his utterance in line 11. However, this explanation and repetition was still insufficient help for Kl, as was evident by her inability to complete the target form in line 12 (holy crap, I'm not any good today, well). Although putting effort into solving the target form through assistance, repetition, and correction, Kl, who had weaker linguistic skills, ultimately failed to accomplish it. This failure might be the result of many possible reasons. Given this context, it seems that when paired learners have unequal linguistic skills, they fail to work in tandem with each other. This may generate implications for groupings when performing tasks, which will be further discussed later.

Another finding worth mentioning is that the results showed that beginning CLLs were able to help each other in constructing L2 meanings and knowledge; however, this did not mean that the outcomes of their construction were free from errors. Excerpt 11 was such an example in which the two learners were discussing the usage of the Chinese measure word 'kǒu'.

Excerpt 11 (Lesson 4 in Class A)

1Ck: og det er et 'kǒu' hvad er hvad er det?

and it is a 'kǒu' what is what is that?

2Ak: det er et af de der 'til' word

It is one of those 'to' word

3Ck: ja

yeah

4Ak: det er et af de der 'til' ord hvor ord i stedet for 'ge'...

It is one of those 'to' words where words instead of 'ge'...

5Ck: så det er ligesom for eksempel tā jiā yǒu øh

so it is like for example his family has eh

6Ak: wǒ jiā er det hvis du snakker om dig selv?

my family is it if you talk about yourself

7Ck: nej det er om dig

no it is about you

8Ak: āh okay

oh fair enough

9Ck: for eksempel hvis jeg siger tā jiā yǒu øh

for example if I say his family has eh

10Ak: og så antallet

and then the number

11Ck: sān āh sān ge rén

three eh three persons

12Ak: ja lige præcis

yes exactly

13CK: kan jeg så sige at jeg ikke behøver kǒu

can I say then I don't need kǒu

14AK: Ja men ja du kan bruge 'kǒu' eller du kan bruge 'ge' du kan bruge 'ge' for 'ge' det er meget universelt 'kǒu' er mere præcis i dette tilfælde tror jeg

yeah but yes you can use 'kǒu' or you can use 'ge' you can use 'ge' for 'ge' is pretty universal 'kǒu' is more precise in this matter but I think

15CK: nǐ jiā yǒu eh sān kǒu rén

your family has three persons

In line 1, Ck addressed his difficulty in accessing the linguistic item 'kǒu' by saying, 'What is that?' In line 2, Ak offered an incorrect explanation, but added one critical piece of information on this item in line 4. This information seemed enough for Ck, as the exclamation 'so' was followed by his attempt to exemplify an utterance with 'kǒu' in line 5. However, his utterance was interrupted by the discussion of whether to use 'tā' or 'wǒ' in lines 6-8. Ak corrected to 'wǒ jiā' following an appropriate explanation in line 6. However, this correction was not agreed upon by Ck (no), who justified his intended expression (it's about you) in line 7. Nevertheless, this justification did not support the use of 'tā' here, as 'tā' was addressed to a third person. However, Ak accepted this justification by his uttering 'oh, fair enough' in line 8. Ck continued to his original production, with Ak's help, and successfully completed the rest of the utterance, without the use of 'kǒu' in line 11. Here, it should be noted that as Chinese measure words, both 'kǒu' and 'ge' were accepted in this context, and thus Ck's production was confirmed by his partner in line 12 (yes, exactly); however, this confirmation confused Ck about the use of 'kǒu', as was evident in line 13, which led Ak to add another detailed explanation to distinguish between uses of 'kǒu' and 'ge'. Finally, Ck successfully produced the target form with 'kǒu' in line 15. Despite this, it was uncertain whether he would be affected by his partner's incorrect translation when using it later. Similarly, both learners may remain uncertain about the use of Chinese pronouns, since Ck held on to his non-target utterance with 'tā', although the appropriate alternative had been suggested.

This incorrect outcome resulting from learner-learner interaction was also the case in terms of Chinese pronunciation. As shown in the results, there were quite a few instances in which learners provided the needed word but, with inappropriate pronunciation, which was then incorporated by their partner, seen in excerpt 12 below.

Excerpt 12 (Lesson 2 in Class A)

1 Sl: øh hvordan er 'fem'?

eh how is 'five'?

2 Dn: yī èr sān sì wǔ

one two three four five

3 Sl: wǔ dì wǔ háng dìyīge yīngyǔ yīngguó england (referring to notes) yīngguó yīngguó tā shì yīngguó ma?

Five the fifth line the first one English England is it England?

In line 1, S1 overtly addressed her inability to say the number ‘five’ in Chinese. Dn recalled this word by counting from the beginning and located the target number, but mispronounced it in line 2. However, this wrong pronunciation was repeated by S1 and incorporated into her next production in line 3. It can be assumed that without teacher’s feedback, this incorrect pronunciation may remain in S1’s linguistic system, which has a negative effect on the accuracy of her L2 development.

Last but not least, it should be noted that there were also some variations in the interactional processes across learner pairs, although the point here was not to compare learner-learner interaction between the two classes. Specifically, the L1, used mainly as metatalk rather than metacognitive talk, was more frequent in Class B than in Class A. In addition, self-correction occurred more frequently than other-correction in both classes. However, as for other-correction, it occurred more in Class A than in Class B. Also, it is worth mentioning that learners in pairs with weak overall linguistic ability were less effective in constructing L2 understandings during interaction. All these findings cast light on CFL teaching and learning, which are discussed in the following section.

5 Discussion

First, this study suggests that beginning learners of CFL benefit from interaction during tasks. As shown in the data, beginning learners of CFL work together on the linguistic issues encountered during tasks by using mutual assistance, correction, co-construction and the L1. In doing so, knowledge shifts between the paired learners, as the learners, even at the beginning stage of learning, vary in their strengths in the L2 (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000). With these unique strengths, they are able to solve the linguistic problem being discussed, thus leading to a higher level of performance that could not be done alone. This performance, from a sociocultural perspective, represents the development of the learners’ L2 ability within the ZPD (Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2013). That is to say, during interaction, beginning learners of CFL not only use their ZPD but also are able to assist each other to bridge the gap in the ZPD. A claim can be made that learning has occurred at that moment of interaction. In addition, the emotional support, as shown in excerpt 4, also helps learners build up a common social space that encourages them to continue performing the task, which, to some extent, contributes to learning as well (Antón & DiCamilla 1999; Swain & Lapkin, 2001). This is particularly true for beginning learners who have preconceived ideas that learning the Chinese language is difficult.

Second, this study suggests the effects of contextual factors on the quality of learner interaction. The data showed that self-correction occurred more than other-correction during interaction. Given the context of this study, two reasons are suggested. One may be attributed to the learner’s social affective concern when correcting his/her partner. This was particularly true with participants in Class B, as they came from all walks of life with different age and social status. This may explain why other-correction occurred less in Class B than in Class A. Another may relate to the learners’ limited knowledge in Chinese, making it difficult for them to identify the errors committed by their partners, let alone making corrections. This is especially true for Chinese pronunciation, as pronunciation was neglected during interaction. Certainly, the limited Chinese proficiency also gives one reason for the prevalent use of the L1 throughout the interaction. In addition, the results also show that the quality of the learner interactions was affected by grouping. As shown in excerpt 10, interactions generated by that unequal pair made the learner with stronger skills feel disappointed, while the other with weaker skills felt pressured and challenged. Consequently, neither learner benefited from their dialogic interaction, as Kowal and Swain (1994) argued that ‘neither student’s needs were within the zone of proximal development of the other’ (p. 86).

Third, this study highlighted the necessary role of the teacher in ensuring the outcomes of learner interaction. The results indicated the positive effects of the interaction between beginning CLLs,

however, this does not mean at all that the teacher is not needed when grouping learners into task-based collaborative activities, which echoes what Swain and Lapkin (1998) suggested. As shown in Excerpt 11, Ck accepted the incorrect explanation about the usage of the Chinese modifier 'kǒu' provided by his partner Ck. Whether this incorrect usage was incorporated by Ck is unclear, however, it is certain that if without the teacher's corrections, these errors might remain in Ck's linguistic system, which thus becomes a barrier to his accuracy in Chinese. In addition, during tasks, learners seldom focused on Chinese pronunciation. There were substantial episodes in which learners struggled about how to pronounce words, but without success. This may be attributed to the difficulty for foreign learners to master Chinese pronunciation (Orton, 2010). On the other hand, it may have something to do with the fact that the learners are beginners. (VanPatten, 1996). Said another way, when beginning learners concentrate on recalling lexical items and organizing them in an appropriate grammatical structure, it leaves them little time to pay attention to their pronunciation at the same time. Although this may be counteracted by a task design that focuses on only one single linguistic item (Algería le la Colina & García Mayo, 2006), there is still a pressing need for the teacher to guarantee the outcome of learner interaction and provide corresponding feedback or subsequent exercises to build on the knowledge gained during the interaction, in this case, to help the learners improve their Chinese pronunciation.

Fourth, this study signaled the need of reconsidering the role of L1 use in the L2 learning process. The data showed that L1 use was common throughout the interaction, functioning more as metatalk than metacognition. This may be explained by the tight-structure of the tasks used in this study, as Algeria le la Colina and García Mayo (2009) found that tasks with tight structure demanded less regulation. Despite this, it is important to note that the use of the L1 does help learners establish their common understanding, reflect on their L2 productions, assess their target forms and create a pleasant learning atmosphere as shown in excerpt 9. As such, it seems difficult to imagine how these beginning learners would be able to effectively perform tasks and successfully construct a solution to linguistic problems without their L1. Therefore, 'stifling the use of the L1 in collaborative activity in an L2 classroom may not be a wise pedagogical practice because it discourages the employment of a critical psychological tool that is essential for collaboration' (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000: 64). Clearly, the point here is not to encourage L1 use, nor to blindly discourage it either, but rather to emphasize a need for a new criterion to reassess the value of the L1. As argued by Wells (1998) and De Guerrero and Villamil (2000), instead of its quantity, the value of the L1 should be judged by its quality in relation to the context of the interaction and the nature of the task at hand.

Last but not least, this study generated implications for classroom CSOL teaching and learning. Given the positive effects of collaborative interaction between beginning CLLs, this study casts light on CSOL instructors in terms of how to make good use of task-based activity to better enhance teaching and learning. In doing so, teachers should be sensitive to grouping and to ensuring the quality of knowledge emerging from interaction, especially in relation to Chinese pronunciation. In addition, it is suggested that task-based activity can be used as an effective alternative to the teacher-lecture method. Using task-based activity can also contribute to establishing a learner-centered classroom as advocated by many researchers for CSOL teaching (Moloney & Xu, 2012).

6 Conclusion

This small-scale study investigated the interaction between beginning learners of CFL during task-based activity and its links to L2 learning. The results revealed that beginning learners of CFL draw on mutual assistance, correction, co-construction, and the L1 to jointly construct L2 knowledge, aiding them to achieve a higher level of performance that could not be accomplished by either of them alone. This accomplishment represents learners' increasing L2 ability within the ZPD. Although this study

did not assess whether this ability has been internalized later, it, at least, can be argued that beginning learners of CFL benefit from their interaction during tasks. In addition, there are also some variations in interaction processes among different pairs, which suggested that the quality of learner interaction was subject to various contextual factors such as individual learner differences in task features, linguistic ability, the characteristics of the target language, and grouping. These findings are helpful for CSOL teaching and learning, especially showing how to effectively use task-based collaborative activity to better enhance CFL classroom teaching and learning.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations. First, it is situated in a specific context with a small sample size. It would be highly desirable to explore whether and how the results of this study would vary with larger samples and more diverse groups among Chinese language learners. Second, the current study is drawn from only five teaching sessions. A longitudinal study would be desirable to probe how beginning learners develop their proficiency in Chinese during this interactional process. Last, the use of the single research method may be limited in triangulating the results of data analysis. It will be particularly desirable for future studies to combine other methods such as interview or stimulated recall so as to have a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny.

Notwithstanding, this study has enriched the empirical base of a sociocultural approach to learner interaction by extending it to a broader context with lower-proficiency learners of Chinese language. From a pedagogical standpoint, implications resulting from this study give light to CSOL instructors in terms of how to improve their teaching and, by extension, the learning of their students. This has contributed to the development of better methods for the teaching of Chinese to speakers of other languages.

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Appendix. Transcription system

(3)	Pause during the on-going interaction
[overlapping between teacher and student
...	pause of one second or less marked by three full stops
?	rising intonation, questions
<u>Under</u>	Utterances with incorrect grammar
(Writing)	give an explanation of what is happening in the background
<i>Italicised</i>	Words with incorrect pronunciation

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Bao Rui is an Instructor of College of International Culture and Education at Zhejiang Normal University, China. Her research interests include Chinese as a second/foreign language teaching and learning, classroom interaction, language teacher and learner belief, and language teacher development.

社会文化理论视域下海外初级汉语学习者互动研究： 对国际汉语教师的启示

鲍蕊

浙江师范大学国际学院，中国

摘要

基于社会文化理论，本文探讨了海外初级汉语学习者之间的互动。数据主要来源于基于任务活动的学习者之间互动录像。通过对该数据的微变化分析，结果显示，海外初级汉语学习者通过互相帮助、纠正、共同构建和第一语言来解决任务过程中遇到的语言问题，这一互动促使学习者完成了个人无法独立完成的任务，进而获得更高水平的语言能力，但不同小组在互动过程中的表现有所不同。本研究说明基于任务活动的同伴互动有助于初级汉语学习者语言能力发展，但同伴互动效果受多种因素影响，如学习者语言能力的个体差异、目的语特点、任务设计和分组形式。基于此，本研究认为学习者之间互动研究需考虑其所处环境，并探讨了对海外汉语教学的相关启示。

关键词

社会文化理论视角，最近发展区，学习者之间互动，海外汉语

作者简介

鲍蕊，2016年于丹麦奥尔堡大学毕业，获文学博士学位。研究兴趣包括第二语言课堂教学与习得、汉语国际教育、华文教育及华人文化认同等。近五年，在国外期刊及著作上发表学术论文十余篇。