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INVESTIGATING PAIR WORK: THE ROLE OF L1 IN SOCIAL
RELATIONS ACROSS PROFICIENCY LEVELS

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Abstract

Although pair interaction in the context of the second language classroom is fundamentally social, rarely are social relations considered in SLA research (e.g., Donato, 1988; Storch, 2001, 2002).

Similarly, despite the important function L1 may play in dyadic interactions, particularly in EFL contexts where learners share the same L1, only few studies (e.g., Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Brooks & Donato, 1994; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003) have examined the function of L1 in pair work.

This paper is part of a larger study on the nature of pair interaction across proficiency levels. The study involved 36 EFL learners completing three different tasks (jigsaw, joint composition, and text editing) in pairs. The learners were paired according to proficiency levels: High-High (H-H), High-Low (H-L), and Low-Low (L-L). Transcribed pair talk was analysed for the patterns of social relations formed (cf. Storch, 2001) and the role of the shared L1.

In this paper we report on four case study pairs: Two pairs who worked collaboratively (one H-H pair and the other L-L), and two who formed an expert/novice pattern (one H-H pair and the other L-L).

Findings show that L1 played a major role in distinguishing between the same patterns across the proficiency levels. That is, whereas collaborative and expert/novice dyads in the L-L level tended to rely heavily on the L1 as a tool to mediate, co-construct, and complete the task, collaborative and expert/novice learners in the H-H level appeared more selective in using the L1. The paper discusses the implications of these findings for language pedagogy, particularly in EFL contexts.