Effects of conversational strategy use on young learners' oral interaction

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Resumo

Este projeto de ação-investigação explorou a interação oral entre pares em aulas de Inglês no ensino primário, tendo como objetivo explorar as estratégias conversacionais utilizadas para a conclusão de três tarefas, e entender como estas influenciaram a comunicação. Investigaram-se três categorias: utilização da língua materna (L1) para gestão das tarefas, estratégias de negociação de significado e estratégias de correção de erros. Utilizaram-se gravações para identificar e quantificar as estratégias utilizadas, e para determinar se estas facilitaram uma comunicação efetiva. Para a recolha de dados, utilizou-se, ainda, um diário da professora e grelhas de autoavaliação dos alunos. De acordo com os resultados, as estratégias conversacionais parecem desempenhar um papel importante na interação oral, pois foram utilizadas em cerca de 50% da produção oral dos alunos. O uso da L1 para gestão de tarefas foi a mais utilizada, embora pareça haver uma tendência para diminuir ao longo do tempo. Apesar da baixa frequência das estratégias de negociação de significado e de correção de erros, o progresso na produção oral dos alunos sugere outros benefícios deste tipo de atividades, nomeadamente a atenção à forma, a exposição à linguagem formulaica e o desenvolvimento de outras competências sociais e cognitivas.

Palavras-chave: interação oral, trabalho em pares, ensino baseado em tarefas, jovens aprendentes.

Abstract

This action research project focused on oral peer interaction in primary English classrooms, aiming to explore the conversational strategies employed by participants to complete three tasks, and how this affected their ability to communicate. Three categories of strategies were investigated: the use of the first language (L1) for task-management purposes, negotiation of meaning strategies and error correction strategies. Transcripts of recordings were used to identify and quantify strategy use and to determine if and how the strategies used helped foster successful communication. Data was also collected using a teaching journal and learner self-assessment.

Results showed that conversational strategies seem to play an important role in peer interaction, as they were used in nearly half of the children's production. L1 for task management was the most frequently used strategy, although there seemed to be a tendency to use less L1 over time. The frequency of use of negotiation of meaning and error correction strategies was relatively low. However, the fact that children showed improvements regarding their oral interaction skills suggests they benefit from this type of activity

by paying attention to form, working with formulaic language, and developing additional social and cognitive skills.

Keywords: oral interaction, pair work, task-based teaching, young learners.

Background on the practicum and the action research project

This action research (AR) project, carried out by the first author (Oliveira, 2019) and supervised by the second author, was developed as part of *Prática de Ensino Supervisionada II* (PES II) at NOVA University, Lisbon. The practical component of the master's degree in Teaching English in Primary Education is divided into two stages – PES I in the 2nd semester and PES II in the 3rd semester of the programme. In both, trainee teachers are placed in a 1st Cycle school which they visit for at least 4 hours per week. In PES I they initially observe their cooperating teacher teach a 3rd or 4th year group for a period of 4 weeks, followed by 4 weeks of co-teaching, and towards the end of the practicum carry out a minimum of 6-8 hours of solo teaching. During PES II they observe and teach a minimum of 10-12 hours in total. However, trainees are encouraged to teach more than the minimum, and in practice most plan and teach one of their cooperating teacher's classes for the whole of the first term, whilst also implementing their AR project.

The AR project is developed in the 2nd semester of the programme in Research Seminar I. Lessons focus on reflective teaching, the teacher-researcher and models of AR (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Trainees are encouraged to choose a topic of interest and prepare a research proposal to include their puzzle(s) or research question(s), a rationale and short literature review, their methodology and a plan of intervention. In Research Seminar II (3rd semester), they gather relevant references for their topic and write their literature review, and their final report is submitted 3 months after completing PES II.

The project reported here aimed to examine how peer interaction amongst primary English learners enabled them to communicate effectively using conversational strategies. As there is presently a broad consensus among researchers regarding the relevant role of peer interaction in language acquisition, it should, in our view, be regularly integrated into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lessons. However, primary English teachers in Portugal tend to avoid this type of activity for several reasons,

including a lack of understanding of the potential of peer interaction to foster language acquisition, and the belief that children do not have adequate linguistic or social skills. Instead, teachers seem to focus primarily on teacher-student interaction, thus limiting learning opportunities in classrooms, leading to excessively teacher-centred lessons which reduce opportunities to interact.

These views however have been challenged by several studies, and the manifold benefits of peer interaction have gained strength among researchers (Philp, Oliver & Mackey, 2008; Oliver & Philp, 2014). Philp et al. (2008) indicate that children draw different benefits from varied patterns of interaction, mostly scaffolding and recasting opportunities when interacting with adults, while peer interaction appears to maximise practice and emphasize the link between linguistic and social competences, as the strategies used during interaction help develop social skills, which in turn result in further linguistic benefits. Consequently, it becomes difficult to argue against the regular use of spoken peer interaction activities in EFL classrooms.

The choice of a task-based approach was based on research indicating that tasks are effective in promoting meaningful interaction between learners, as they foster engagement and collaboration, favour equal participation, and the task context facilitates unambiguous understanding of the partners' utterances (Oliver, Philp & Duchesne, 2017). Nevertheless, when designing or selecting tasks for young learners, teachers should ensure students have the necessary language to complete the task, and that the level of difficulty, cognitive and social demands are age appropriate.

It therefore seems recommendable that EFL teachers develop a deeper understanding of the processes involved in peer interaction, and of the benefits arising from it. With this in mind, the research questions underlying this study were the following:

1. What conversational strategies are used by 9-10-year-old, 4th grade EFL students while performing task-based activities in pairs, and how often are they used?

2. How do these strategies influence children's ability to communicate?

Literature review

Benefits of peer interaction for young learners

While focusing on the effects of task repetition, Pinter (2007) studied a pair of 10-year-old EFL learners completing three spot-the-differences tasks over three weeks and found improvement in fluency and ability to handle task demands. She also found instances of peer support, with the more competent student assisting the weaker one, and children displaying progress in their ability to pay attention and respond to each other appropriately. However, both the small sample size and the experimental setting advise against the generalizability of these findings.

Oliver et al. (2017) analyzed twenty-two 5-7-year-old children, and twenty 11-12-year-old English as an Additional Language students working in pairs to complete two-way information gap tasks, to quantify instances of a) cooperation, reciprocity and conflict resolution, b) task management skills, c) cognitive involvement, and d) focus on form. They found that children generally worked in a cooperative fashion to support each other's language production and that, despite instances of unresolved conflict, learners mostly tried to resolve conflict themselves, often by simply moving forward with the task. Additionally, students displayed adequate task management skills, were nearly always on task, linguistically and cognitively engaged, and demonstrated the ability to focus on language by negotiating meaning or providing feedback. Moreover, older students showed greater cooperation and reciprocity, although they at times found the tasks insufficiently interesting or challenging.

The Interaction Hypothesis

Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1981) suggests that interaction facilitates language acquisition. When experiencing communication breakdowns, learners resort to negotiation of meaning (NoM) strategies, operationalized by Long as clarification requests (when a speaker elicits clarification, usually through the use of questions or statements such as *I don't understand*), confirmation checks (when a speaker seeks confirmation of his interlocutor's utterance through repetition of all or part of the interlocutor's previous utterance with rising intonation), and comprehension checks (when the speaker tries to ascertain that his utterance has been fully understood through the use of a tag question, the repetition of all or part of the previous utterance, or by using explicit questions such as *Do you understand?*). However, Long studied native and non-

native adult speakers (NS and NNS) in immersion contexts, so his conclusions cannot be generalized to children learning EFL in formal instruction settings.

Studies on young learner' peer interaction

Several studies have focused on the use of conversational strategies by children, particularly regarding their frequency and type, and the context in which they occur. Oliver (1998) studied 8-13-year-old ESL students completing two communicative tasks in pairs and concluded that while they used and benefited from Long's NoM strategies, there were differences in relation to adults regarding the proportional use of individual strategies. The most significant difference regarded the near absence of comprehension checks, which the author justified with the claim that "possibly because of their level of development and their purported egocentric nature, children tend to focus on constructing their own meaning, and less on facilitating their partners' construction of meaning" (p. 379). Oliver (2002) studied the interaction between NS/NS, NNS/NS and NNS/NNS dyads of 8–13-year-old students in ESL settings completing two communicative tasks. Conclusions pointed to non-native and low proficiency learners using more NoM strategies. In fact, research suggests that although a minimum level of proficiency is necessary for learners to negotiate meaning (Ibarrola & Martinez, 2015), once this threshold has been achieved, NoM is more frequent among less proficient students and less frequent among more proficient ones, whose need to rely on it to construct meaning is reduced (Oliver, 2002).

Although research involving children in EFL contexts remains scarce, some studies focusing on child peer interaction in EFL settings have been conducted. Ibarrola and Martinez (2015) studied eight pairs of 7-8-year-old EFL children with very low levels of proficiency while playing a guessing game in a classroom setting to determine the frequency and type of NoM strategies used. As in previous studies, they found that: a) EFL child learners used NoM strategies, although significantly fewer than children and adults in ESL contexts, probably due to their lower level of proficiency, and b) they used the same type of strategies as adults apart from comprehension checks, which they also attributed to the participants' lower developmental stage.

Finally, García-Mayo and Ibarrola (2015) analysed 20 pairs of EFL 3rd and 5th graders and 20 pairs of children of the same age learning English in a CLIL context completing a

picture placement task, to determine the effects of setting and age on children's use of NoM strategies. They concluded that, although all students used NoM strategies, CLIL learners used nearly twice as many as EFL learners, but resorted to L1 much less frequently, suggesting that increased exposure to English provides learners with stronger interactional skills to negotiate for meaning. On the other hand, 5th graders in both groups used less NoM but, surprisingly, more L1 than 3rd graders, indicating that age can simultaneously lead to less NoM but more L1 use, with the authors suggesting this may be due to a decrease in the older students' motivation.

In conclusion, research indicates that children engage in and benefit from peer interaction. They use conversational strategies, although the proportional use of individual strategies differs from that of adults. These differences arise for several reasons, from the children's age and level of cognitive development to their language proficiency and learning context.

The research

Context

This study was conducted in a fourth grade EFL class composed of twenty-five 9-10-year-old pupils, all of whom spoke Portuguese as their first language (L1). Most had been learning English since pre-school and, from 1st to 4th grade had two weekly one-hour lessons.

Action research was the methodology used in this study. Burns (2010) defines it as a small-scale, contextualized study with teachers acting as researchers, as they identify problematic or otherwise relevant topics to explore within their classroom environment, and are afterwards expected to act on their findings, thus improving their practice. The stages involved in the study are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Stages of action research

Stages	Description

1 – Selecting the topic and determining the research questions	*Topic*: spoken peer interaction *Research questions*: *1. What conversational strategies are used by 9-10-year-old 4th grade EFL students while performing task-based activities in pairs, and how often are they used?* *2. How do these strategies influence the children's ability to communicate?*
2 – Planning (scheduling, developing data gathering tools and methodology)	*Scheduling*: implementing 3 tasks over a period of two and a half months. *Data gathering tools*: spot-the-differences tasks, teacher's notes and students' self-assessment charts. *Methodology*: recording and transcribing students' production, coding conversational strategies, followed by quantitative and qualitative data analysis.
3 – Data collection	Implementing data collection tools
4 – Reflection	Analysis and interpretation of collected data, reflection on implications for classroom practice and suggestions for further research

Procedure

Prior to the beginning of the study, letters of consent were sent to the school board, parents and students, stating its purpose, the procedures to be followed and the conditions regarding participation. All pairs recorded included one weaker and one stronger student, as Pinter (2007) suggests this might lead to more frequent interaction. Learners were included in one of four proficiency categories: below average (two), average (two), above average (three) and significantly above average (learner). Pairs were composed of the same students over the three tasks. Pair A included Emma and Sherlock Holmes, pair B included Maddie and James, pair C included Frederick and Margaret, and pair D included Thomas and Charlotte, all pseudonyms chosen by the children. Data was collected through the completion of spot-the-differences tasks over a period of nine weeks, with approximately three weeks between them. Students were recorded for the length of the task (10 minutes) and all the recorded dyads were able to spot the six differences in the tasks.

The tools

The data gathering tools consisted of the recordings made during the tasks, the teacher's notes to provide information complementing the recordings, and the students' self-assessment charts to provide the children's views on their own progress.

The tasks

These were spot-the-differences tasks where children were given two picture cards with six differences between them, and worked in pairs, asking and answering questions to identify them. The topic and language of each task followed the three course book units taught during the practicum, and tasks were implemented towards the end of the unit to ensure students had the necessary linguistic resources to complete them. The choice of communicative tasks was based on research indicating these are particularly effective in promoting meaningful interaction between young learners, as they encourage engagement, equal participation and require effective collaboration and unambiguous understanding of the interlocutors' utterances (Oliver et al., 2017). Recorded tasks were transcribed, and the strategies identified coded and quantified for each pair. Relevant excerpts were then analysed from a qualitative perspective, to determine if, how and when the strategies used helped foster successful communication.

The teacher's notes

These were reflective notes taken immediately after the lessons in which the tasks were completed, to complement the data from the recordings and included the teacher's perceptions and possible interpretation of events. Although an attempt was made to observe the whole class, there was a closer focus on the study's participants, particularly during the task completion stage. Initially, observation categories included the time taken to complete the activity and the children's disposition and attitudes towards them. Subsequently, the need arose to add information regarding the children's comments during the feedback stage, as they included information regarding their views on the tasks, and on progress concerning the time taken to complete the tasks, the children's spoken production, and their awareness of L2 syntactic patterns. These comments were subsequently listed and examined to determine whether they were supported by other data gathering tools and by previous studies, thus providing possible explanations for some of the study's findings.

The students' self-assessment charts

Although used mainly to foster students' reflection on their progress and originally not included in the defined tools, over time self-assessment data became relevant to this study as it provided the children's own views on their progress regarding interactional skills, motivation, and level of engagement with the task. Children were asked to fill in a self-assessment chart at the end of each unit, including questions about listening, speaking, reading, writing and peer interaction. However, for the purposes of this study only information regarding question 1, which entailed determining the children's perception of their progress and question 3, which determined whether children displayed higher levels of motivation over time, were analysed.

The conversational strategies

The conversational strategies investigated in this study include NoM and error-correction strategies, as well the use of L1 and L2 for task management purposes.

a) *NoM strategies* involved comprehension checks, confirmation checks and clarification requests, which were classified as such based on function rather than form. They also included self-repetition – partial or complete repetition of one's own utterance, either to respond to a clarification request or confirmation check or to ensure the interlocutor's understanding, and other-repetition, that is, partial or complete repetition of the interlocutor's utterance, usually for the speaker to gain time to organize and produce language Prompting was also included as a NoM strategy and occurs when a speaker provides his interlocutor with language, either to encourage him or suggest an idea, or to overcome communication obstacles.

b) *Error-correction strategies* included other correction – the provision of the correct target form in a way that the interlocutor is expected to easily perceive it as a corrective utterance (Ibarrola & Martinez, 2015), and self-correction – a speaker's correction of his or her own utterance without being prompted by an interlocutor (Foster & Ohta, 2005).

c) *Use of L1* was considered when an utterance contained at least one word in L1. Results were expressed as a percentage of total turns.

Results

Frequency of conversational strategies

Overall, data analysis indicates that conversational strategies played an important role in peer interaction, as they were used in approximately 50% of the children's production (Figure 1). The exceptionally high number of strategies used by pair B seems to be due to the presence of a weaker than average student who was new to the school and had started learning English only in 3rd grade.

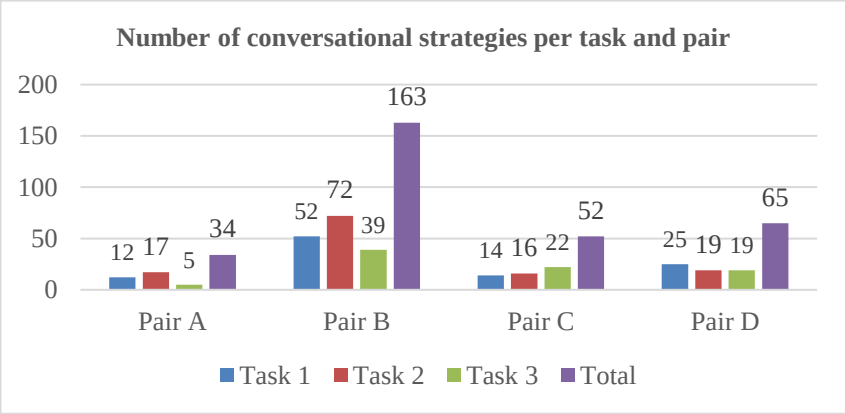

Figure 1. Number of conversational strategies per task and pair

These results show that children used conversational strategies while engaging in peer interaction, although with significant variation between type of strategy and pairs. The unusually high number of strategies used by pair B, including a weaker than average student, suggests that low proficiency increases the need for conversational strategies.

Use of L1 for task-management purposes

The significant variation between tasks and pairs was mostly related to the use of L1 for task management purposes, clearly the most frequently used strategy (Figure 2). This seems to reflect this group's limited L2 skills, with students resorting to L1 to address procedural-related issues and to code switch when their knowledge of English was insufficient to convey their message.

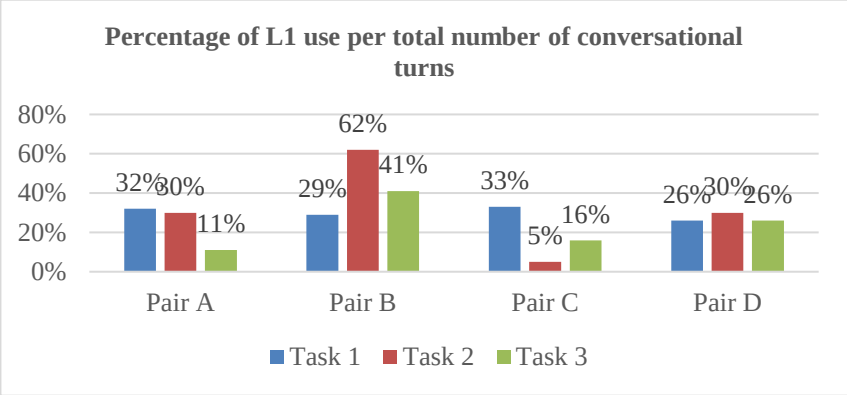

Figure 2. Percentage of L1 use per total number of conversational turns

The particularly high frequency of use of L1 by pair B appeared to be mostly related to the performance of the weaker than average student. Moreover, this pair's exceptionally frequent use of L1 in task 2 may have resulted from the introduction of the genitive in the question (*What does X's mother/father, etc. do?*), an unfamiliar structure to these students.

Conversely, the low variation and frequent use of L1 evidenced by pair D appears to stem from a pragmatic, competitive attitude, as these students seemed particularly focused on completing the tasks before the rest of the class. Contrarily, pair C's use of L1 was particularly low, possibly because it included a student with exceptional linguistic skills whose efforts to use L2 for task-management are displayed in excerpt 3, where Frederick made an effort to avoid L1 to correct his partner, instead using simplified L2 and modelling the appropriate question.

Excerpt 1:

Margaret: Er (1.0) What time.go to bed.Garfield?What time Garfield.go to bed?

Frederick*:* Hum (3.0) In my in my paper (1.0) Garfield has a dinner. In my paper Garfield has a dinner. No go to bed. Er (2.0) What Garfield does do at seven.seven thirty?

Although the use of L1 was expected in a low-proficiency, EFL context, there seemed to be a tendency to use less L1 over time, which appears to stem mostly from task familiarity. Additionally, L2 was almost exclusively used to carry out the task, with very few examples of its use for task management purposes, and only produced by exceptionally strong students or very limited in range (*Yes. /No./You. /I don't know.*),

suggesting that, while increased use of L1 for task-management purposes is not always related to lower linguistic skills, the use of L2 for similar purposes appears to be contingent upon these.

These results, particularly the performances of pairs B and C, indicate that both task familiarity and higher proficiency lead to a reduction in the use of L1.

Error-correction strategies

Figure 3 shows that error-correction strategies, whether self or other, were few. Of the 24 occasions of error correction strategy use, 13 were self-correction strategies and 11 were other-correction strategies. No examples of recasts were found.

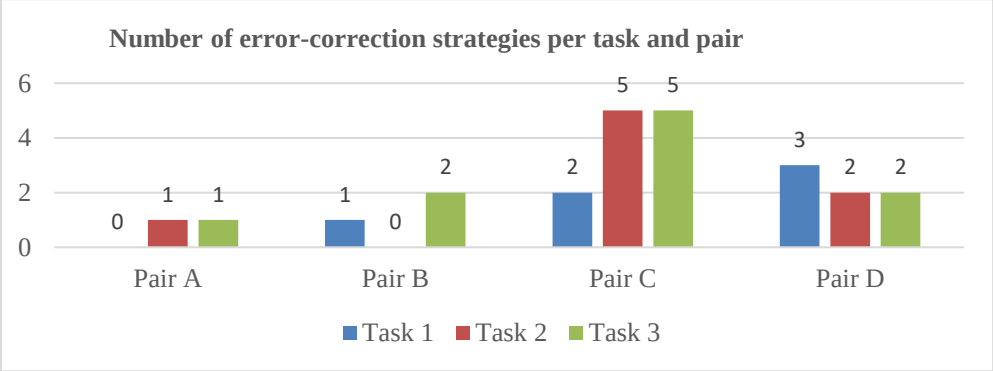

Figure 3. Number of error correction strategies per task and pair

Almost half the error-correction strategies were used by pair C, and mostly produced by the particularly proficient student, who was capable of helping and even praising his partner, as shown in excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2:

Margaret: He have a chower.

Frederick: Have a chower? *Não* (No). Has a shower.

Margaret: Has a chower.

Frederick: *Não é chower*. (It's not chower.)

Margaret: Chower.

Frederick: Is not chower, is shower.

Margaret: Shower.

Frederick**:** Good!

Although this low frequency suggests this age group's limited ability to use error-correction strategies, it is also likely related to children's tendency to prioritize meaning over form (Cameron, 2001), as in most instances of inaccurate production, interlocutors were able to understand and convey meaning and moved the conversation along without signalling errors. Moreover, none of the error-correction strategies identified resulted from communication difficulties, hinting that while they might improve learners' accuracy, they are not essential to successful communication. Finally, the performance of pair C suggests that higher proficiency facilitates error correction.

Negotiation of meaning strategies

In line with Ibarrola and Martinez's (2015) findings, Figure 4 shows that NoM strategies were infrequent throughout this study, and significant variation was found in type and distribution per pair, appearing to stem from individual differences.

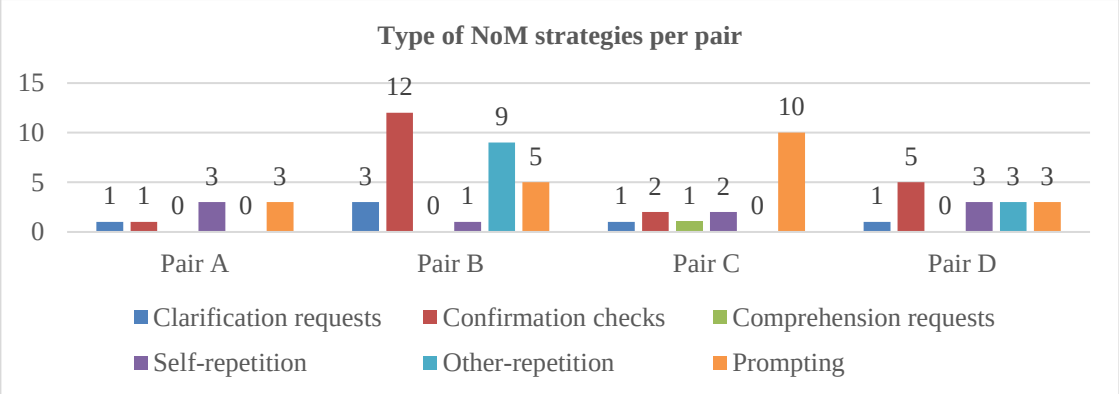

Figure 4. Type of NoM strategies per pair

As in Oliver (2002), variation regarding distribution per pair appeared to be related to the learners' language skills, as pair B, which included a particularly weak student, used nearly twice as many strategies as the remaining three, emphasizing this learner's increased need to negotiate meaning due to lower linguistic skills. For instance, this weaker student was responsible for 8 of 12 other-repetitions, suggesting he needed added time to decode his interlocutor's utterances, and to produce his own. However, the fact that this pair reduced its use of NoM strategies by approximately half between tasks

(Figure 5) may reflect the student's progress. In fact, variation in type of NoM strategies appears to be linked not only to language skills but also to the function of the strategy, that is, whether students used them to request or to provide assistance, with less skilled students in each pair producing 34 out of 36 of the former, and the more skilled producing 22 out of 32 of the latter.

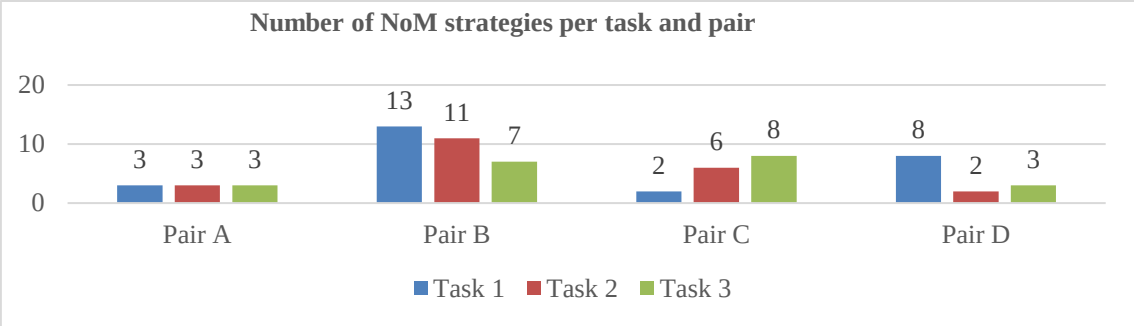

Figure 5. Number of NoM strategies per task and pair

Regarding strategies used to request help, confirmation checks were the most frequent, with only six clarification requests and 12 examples of other repetition identified. Conversely, prompts were the most recurrent assistance providing strategy. Only one comprehension check was found, produced by Frederick, the exceptionally strong student, supporting Oliver's (1998) view on how children's low proficiency and egocentric nature limit their ability to focus on their interlocutor's needs. However, the 12 situations of self-repetition may perform a similar function, with students acknowledging their partners' difficulties and actively working to overcome them.

Negotiation of meaning strategies and communication difficulties

Most NoM strategies resulted from communication difficulties, apart from other-repetition situations, which one might argue do not necessarily stem from meaning-related issues but either from the learner's need for additional time to remember or organize language production, or to display a reaction to the interlocutor's previous utterance. Clarification requests, confirmation checks and comprehension checks are, by definition, strategies used to address communication difficulties. Prompting however may occur in the absence of communication difficulties if a speaker wishes to encourage or suggest an idea to his interlocutor. However, all 21 examples of prompting identified in

this study resulted from speech difficulties, signalled either by speech pauses or by incorrect/incomprehensible language production, as in excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3:
Thomas: Er (1.0) What does Doug have to do?
Charlotte: Er (1.0) He has to do (2.0)
Thomas: Homework?
Charlotte: Do homework. Er.He has to.

Use of other NoM strategies unrelated to communication difficulties was scarce. Other strategies used in this context consisted mostly of self and other correction when meaning was clear despite problems with sentence structure and/or pronunciation. Only one situation was identified of a student praising his partner after correction, hinting at children's tendency to focus on constructing their own meaning rather than acknowledging their interlocutor's.

Negotiation of meaning strategies and output

Very few of the NoM strategies identified in this study resulted in significant modification or expansion of their spoken production. Most of the output produced consisted of examples of self-repetition in response to clarification requests, as in excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4:
Thomas: *Feed the cat.*
Charlotte: *Cat?*
Thomas**:** *The cat.*

However, the fact that nearly all communication difficulties were resolved suggests that children were successful in preventing breakdowns. Additionally, students evidenced progress regarding their interactional skills (less time to complete the tasks, and over time, fewer speech pauses and hesitations, improved pronunciation, and increased awareness of the L2 syntactic patterns). Therefore, the benefits of peer interaction seem to stem from the need to pay attention to form, the development of other cognitive and social skills

(Garcia-Mayo & Ibarrola, 2015), the exposure to formulaic language, and the increase of children's motivation and confidence to use L2.

In conclusion, conversational strategies play an important role in peer interaction, especially the use of L1 amongst weaker learners, although this diminished as the study progressed. Use of error correction strategies was also limited, as learners focused more on meaning than form. Although learners used NoM strategies infrequently, they were employed more frequently by weaker learners who often used them to request help from partners, while stronger learners employed them to provide their colleagues with assistance when difficulties were perceived, even when not openly requested. Furthermore, even if language proficiency often limited participants' output to repetition, interjections, and short expressions in L2, nearly all the NoM strategies identified were effective in helping students overcome whatever difficulties they encountered. As in Oliver et al. (2017), these tendencies indicate children's ability to use other strategies to work collaboratively towards successful communication, simultaneously increasing their motivation and confidence to use L2, and significantly reducing the amount of time necessary to complete the tasks.

Individual differences and self-assessment

The relevance of different language proficiency levels as a criterion for pair composition became clearer after analysis of the use of strategies revealed significant discrepancies between their use by students in the same pairs, as shown in Figures 6 and 7, where the stronger students in each pair are identified as student 1 and the weaker as student 2.

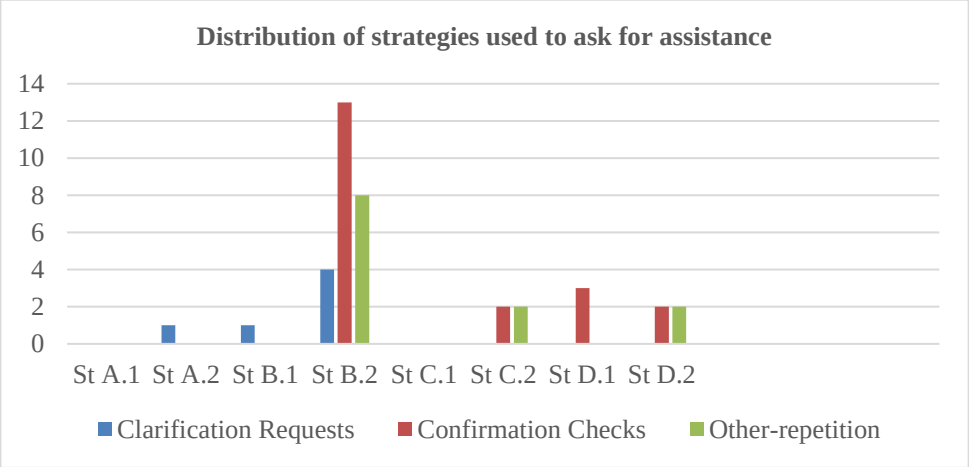

Figure 6. Distribution of strategies to ask for assistance

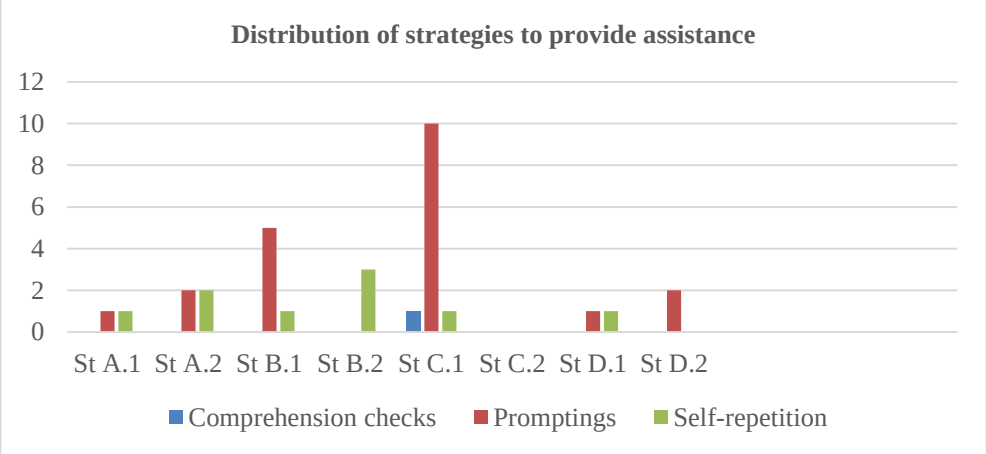

Figure 7. Distribution of strategies to provide assistance

Behind these discrepancies lies the fact that the weaker learners tended to produce strategies to request assistance (clarification requests, confirmation checks and other repetitions). Conversely, there seemed to be a broad tendency for stronger students to produce more strategies to provide assistance (self-repetitions, promptings, and comprehension checks). Although Figure 6 shows that the weaker students in pairs A and D produced more of these strategies than their partners, 22 out of 31 strategies to provide assistance were in fact produced by the stronger students.

This suggests that while weaker learners benefited from interacting with stronger peers, stronger students also strengthened their skills by paying attention to form, by increased language exposure and practice, and by developing their confidence and motivation to use the L2. In fact, the students' self-assessment charts showed acknowledgement of

progress in their ability to understand and make themselves understood by their colleagues (Table 2), with four students going from *I need help!* to *Good!*, two from *I need help!* to *Great!* and 11 from *Good!* To *Great!* between tasks 1 and 3, and five students explicitly expressing their preference for peer interaction in task 1, 12 in task 2 and 14 in task 3, showing an increase in motivation over time.

Table 2. Students' response to question 1 of the self-assessment charts throughout tasks

	Task 1	**Task 2**	**Task 3**
I need help!	6	4	0
Good!	14	16	18
Great!	5	5	7

Moreover, according to the teacher's notes, progress was registered regarding the students' linguistic and interactional skills, with students taking less time to complete the tasks, evidencing fewer speech pauses and hesitations, improving their pronunciation, and their awareness of the L2 syntactic patterns and, in the post-task stage, openly expressing their satisfaction regarding the cooperation involved in the tasks. Therefore, peer interaction appeared to be effective in fostering not only language acquisition, but also in promoting learners' social and collaborative skills.

Conclusion

Relevance of peer interaction in the classroom context

Given the results obtained, it becomes difficult to argue against the frequent inclusion of spoken peer interaction in lessons. Firstly, research indicates that interaction is fundamental for language acquisition to take place. Consequently, if teacher-student interaction is limited, and the benefits are not the same as those resulting from peer interaction, the need for the latter in our classrooms becomes apparent. Secondly, although communication difficulties were frequent, using conversational strategies helped children work collaboratively to overcome obstacles, developing not only linguistic but also other cognitive and social skills. Thirdly, peer interaction provided for productive, engaging and meaningful student-centred practice of the target language. Finally, it seemed to play an important role in fostering the children's self-confidence and willingness to use L2. Moreover, teachers can extend these benefits. For example, task-

based activities appear to be effective at promoting peer interaction, as tasks enhance the communicative purpose of the activity by offering a clear, ludic goal to increase motivation. Additionally, setting up and modelling tasks can provide opportunities to teach children the formulaic language needed to complete the task, reducing their need for L1. We can also improve students' ability to use NoM and error-correction strategies, by modelling them through teacher-student interaction, or by explicitly teaching and encouraging students to use them, which has been successfully achieved with adults (Naughton, 2006).

Benefits of AR and suggestions for further research: Ana Débora's reflection

As teachers, we know our students learn by doing, by reflecting on what they are doing, how they are doing it, and how they can enhance this process. My first experience with AR taught me to apply these principles to my teaching practice, with self-reflection leading to a number of adjustments throughout the process, as data analysis often raised further questions. For example, although initially only NoM strategies were included, after analysis of the first task it became clear I needed to consider further strategies. Similarly, although originally not included as a data gathering tool, the students' self-assessment became relevant as it drew my attention to the role of variables such as motivation or task engagement and familiarity. Finally, progress regarding children's interactional skills highlighted the relevance of non-linguistic skills, such as their ability to work collaboratively, in successful communication.

Having the opportunity to research my own classroom led me to develop a stronger understanding of what happens when students are engaged in peer interaction, and how students benefit. I learned that children use different conversational strategies to communicate with their peers, and that these strategies enhance their language acquisition, namely by increasing their ability and motivation to communicate in L2. Students needed less time to complete the tasks, over time their speech showed fewer pauses and hesitations, their pronunciation improved, and they developed an increased awareness of L2 syntax.

Several questions have arisen from this study. It would be interesting to analyse the effects of task-based activities on the use of strategies over a longer period of time, particularly concerning the students' need to use L1 and their ability to use L2 (if properly

taught/modelled), whether formulaically or in a more comprehensive manner, for task management purposes. The children's capacity to extend L2 use to produce more complex language might also benefit from a longer research interval. Furthermore, and although keeping in mind that language development is limited by the participants' age and skills, a study of progress regarding pronunciation, speech pace and structure awareness might provide insight into these aspects of language production.

Finally, I would suggest research regarding the composition of pairs, to ascertain how this variation influences young learners' use of conversational strategies, and to what extent these strategies affect their ability to communicate successfully.

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