Repetition and young learners´ initiations in the L2: a corpus-driven analysis

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Abstract

The present study is based on the analysis of classroom interactions between children and with their teacher in different types of foreign language contexts. The subjects of our study are five-year-old children and their teachers from different types of schools, with different degrees of immersion in the L2. The data comes from the UAM-corpus, which is collecting spoken data from different types of EFL contexts.[1]

The source of our analysis is based on Halliday´s and Painter´s classification of the communicative functions that children can convey in their mother tongue at the pre-school level (Halliday 1975; Painter 1999). In this paper, we will provide a corpus-driven classification of the different types of repetitions performed by both teachers and children. We believe that teachers should encourage certain types of repetitions in the children´s discourse. The data shows that when children are encouraged to repeat certain utterances with specific discourse functions, even children in low immersion contexts will end up initiating the interaction with no help of the teacher. This is especially important in the case of foreign language learners, in order to avoid their functional language production being limited to responses to their teacher´s initiations.

1. Introduction

The present study is part of a larger study that focuses on the functional analysis of a spoken corpus of English as a foreign language. The corpus has been collected from different types of EFL contexts with different degrees of immersion (from complete to low-immersion contexts). The first part of this corpus, which will be used in this study, contains data from five-year-old children and their teachers. One of the reasons for our choice of this type of subjects is the growing interest in Spain, in the last few years, in introducing the teaching of English at the pre-school level. Moreover, there has been very little research on how a foreign language develops at this age.

Halliday´s (1975) and Painter´s (1999) analysis of the language of their children focused on their observation that children develop their language because they need to do things with it. Following this idea, the point of departure of our study was that, at the pre-school level, the teacher should encourage learners to use the L2 to convey different types of functions (to give information, to ask for information, to order an action, etc...). At this age and level, in our opinion, the priority should be that the children perceive the learning of a foreign language as a process where they can achieve things with it, where the L2 has a functional purpose, in the same way as their mother tongue.

In this particular paper, we focus on the use of repetition, both by teachers and children, in both a high-immersion and a low-immersion classroom context, and the different functions conveyed.

2. Repetition in the language of teachers and pupils

In the 1970s began a great interest in the analysis of the language used with the children, which was called *baby talk* or *motherese* (Snow and Ferguson 1977). This kind of research focused on the importance of interaction and found that parents used well-structured sentences, repetitions and reformulations in order to guarantee communication. However, some authors, such as Aitchison (1998), questioned the validity of the input theory and argued that parents´corrections and reformulations had no positive effects on the child´s linguistic development. Aitchison referred here to the grammatical complexity. However, as we will try to show in this paper, repetitions and expansions have a lot of influence in other types of linguistic developments, such as the pragmatic ones. In our opinion, input and

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interaction are fundamental aspects in the functional development of a foreign language, especially at the pre-school level.

Repetitions are not only a characteristic of the language of the parents. The results of studies on communication in childhood show that the children tend to reinitiate communication when they don´t receive any response. Garvey and Beringer (1981) find out that children use repetition to reinitiate their discourse 1/3 of the times. Repetition is also a common strategy used by foreign language learners. In her classification of learner strategies, Oxford (1990) considers "repetition" a cognitive strategy within the group of "direct strategies".

As far as teacher repetitions are concerned, Pica (1994) shows that when sentences are repeated or reformulated to enhance comprehension, the learners have more opportunities to become aware of characteristics of the L2. In the analysis of the L2 teacher´s language, Richards and Lockhart (1994) find that the instructions are repetitive in order to facilitate their pupils´ comprehension. Classroom discourse is not always spontaneous and it has some elements common to other type of interactions in everyday life and some elements that are specific of the classroom context. At the pre-school level, the classroom discourse tends to be very similar to the type of interaction that is carried out at home between parents and children. Therefore, the use of repetitions by both teachers/parents and learners/children is common in both contexts. Parents tend not to correct the form of their children´s utterances. They seem to be more worried about communication and they tend to repeat the correct form if something is not very clear (Kess 1992). With these parameters children´s language develops. Therefore, the teacher´s discourse should be similar in second language contexts at an early age.

However, there is a type of interaction that is characteristic and specific of the L2 classroom: teacher initiation-learner response-teacher feedback (Sinclair & Coulthard 1975). Usually, after correcting the learners, the teacher expects them to repeat the correct utterance. This is a type of repetition encouraged by the teacher that is very common in classroom contexts. We believe it is very important for teachers to ask learners to produce this kind of repetitions in EFL contexts at initial learning levels, as they will lead, in the end, to the learners´ initiation of interactions, as we will see in the present paper.

As far as bilingual contexts are concerned, Genesee (1994) suggests the teacher repetitions of important words as one of the ways of facilitating comprehension. He suggests the importance that the teacher offers opportunities for language use and interaction, promoting rich activities that give the children the opportunity to initiate a conversation. He also suggests the importance of encouraging children´s repetitions of the teacher´s model in order to stimulate specific linguistic aspects.

3.   The function of repetition in the corpus: qualitative analysis

The function of repeating is included in many of the taxonomies on pragmatic functions both outside and inside the classroom context. In the analysis of the language of the child, it is important to mention taxonomies such as the one by Vila (1987) and by Ninio et al. (1994), which include the function of imitating through repetition as very characteristic of the language of the child. Vila (1987), for example, describes the function of imitating as characteristic of the dialogue and defines it as the function of repeating the adult´s utterance without providing any information. In the analysis of children´s production in second language classroom contexts it is important to mention Cathcart´s taxonomy (1986). She identifies another type of repetition, which consists of children repeating their own utterances in order to reinforce a message (in this case it is self-repetition, as opposed to imitation of the other´s utterances, which is the function identified in Vila´s and Ninio et al.´s taxonomies).

In a broader analysis, we classified the different pragmatic functions realised by teachers and pupils in our corpus based on Halliday´s and Painter´s classification of the functions of language that children realise in their mother tongue: personal, informative, heuristic, interactional, regulatory and instrumental. We made a corpus-driven subclassification within each function and we added some functions that we found specific of the foreign language classroom context. We found that it was important to consider a function specific of the teacher, called teacher feedback, and another function that we called secondary functions, whose aim was reinforcing a specific message. The different types of repetitions were classified as follows[2]:

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[2]   Not all the functions presented below were always realised through repetitions.

Teacher repetitions:

I./ TEACHER FEEDBACK (other-repetition/ voluntary)

I.a./ Repetition of the message given by the learner in order to encourage them to say more or as a simple acknowledgement

Example:

> TCH: And how do you tear it off?
> CH: This cuts it
> TCH: Oh, that cuts it...
> CH: Like this

I.b./ Repetition of the message given by the learner in order to show positive assessment.

 Example:

> TCH: You want to cut the bread. Where does that come from? Where does th- the bread come from?
> CH: From wheat.
> TCH: From wheat.

In example Ib, the teacher asks the pupil a display question. Therefore, we have considered the teacher´s repetition of the child´s response as having a positive evaluative function. On the other hand, in example 1a the teacher asks a referential question, and the repetition of the child´s response does not have an evaluative function in this case, but an interactional function.[3]

Children repetitions:

II./ RESPONSE TO THE TEACHER´S PEDAGOGIC REGULATORY FUNCTION (other-repetition/ non-voluntary) The teacher asks a pupil to imitate or repeat with pedagogic purposes, so that he/she learns an utterance better or as reinforced input for their classmates.

II.a./ The children are made to imitate the teacher´s utterance

Example:[4]

TCH: An elephant?
CH: An elephant?
TCH: In my house? No way
CH: No way

II.b./ The children are made to repeat their own utterance

Example:

 CH: How many?

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[3] Display questions are those where the answer is known for the speaker and referential questions are those where the speaker does not know the answer. The first type is characteristic of the language of the teacher, in order to test their pupils' knowledge.

[4] This extract belongs to an activity where several pupils participate in a role-play about a mother who does not allow her child to have certain animals at home. The dialogue is, in many cases, repetitive. However, this repetition seems to be necessary for the learners to complete the dialogue at this initial stage (we must remember that the pupils are five-year-old EFL learners).

TCH: Fernando, sh, sh, can you repeat, David?
CH: How many?

One of the most characteristic types of interaction in a second language context is that where the teacher gives a model that the child has to imitate (Prator 1969). Among first language acquisition studies, some within a generative approach have suggested the low impact of children´s imitation for their language development (Ervin 1964). Aitchison (1998) points out that repetition is necessary but is not enough: *What is being said is that practice alone cannot account for language acquisition: children do not learn merely by constant repetition of items* (Aitchison 1998:75). In our opinion, it is important to encourage children to imitate in foreign language classroom contexts at an early age, even though it does not create a natural interaction in the L2 classroom.

III./ CHILDREN´S SPONTANEOUS REPETITIONS OF THE TEACHER´S OR OTHER CHILDREN´S UTTERANCES (other-repetition/voluntary)

Example:

T*CH: Sit down ((TO FERNANDO)) OK. And now tell me, what's this? ((SHOWS A PICTURE))*
CH: Boy.
CH: Boy

One of the most characteristic types of interaction between the child and the adult includes the repetition that the child makes of the language of the adult (Montfort et al. 1996). In second language learning contexts, Genesee (1994) observes that the children have the tendency to repeat, only with the aim of practising something new for them.

Teacher and children repetitions:

IV./ RESPONSE TO A REQUEST FOR CLARIFICATION (self-repetition/non-voluntary)

Example:

a)

CH: Red.
TCH: Sorry?
CH: Red

b)

CH:You know? My daddy has . three or four brothers.
CH: What?
CH: My daddy has three or four brothers

In examples a) the teacher demands the repetition for clarification and in b) it´s a child that demands it from one of his classmates.

V./ SECONDARY FUNCTION (self-repetition/ voluntary) Self-repetition of a message to reinforce it

Example:

CH: and then .. he do it wrong
TCH: He did it wrong. Why did he do it wrong? How was it wrong?

In the acquisition of the mother tongue, self-repetition is one of the most common strategies used to teach and learn. In the acquisition of a second language, Tomlin (1994) argues that repetition is a social

act with cognitive consequences. With repetition, the teacher helps the pupil to understand the sentence produced, and this has the cognitive consequence of helping the learner to transform "input" in the L2 into "intake".

The secondary functions could be classified into what Halliday calls "textual meaning", as they are used to clarify what has already been said. We have followed Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) when they classify some of the moves as "subordinate", when they are not followed by a response and depend on the central move. In our taxonomy, we have considered different types of secondary functions. We have included here the one that involves repetition of the previous utterance. We have codified an utterance with this function when there is a repetition of the content of the message, even though it is repeated with other words, as we can see in the example above. However, when the children use this function, reinforcing their message, they tend to use the exact words of the central move, as we can see in the following example:

> CH1: I'm hungry. ((NOISE)) I'm hungry.
> CH2: This is television. This is television.
> TCH: OK. Television.

In this example, we have a case of repetition of an utterance by a pupil to reinforce his need: he wants something to eat. The other type of repetition made by another child has the purpose of showing that he knows the answer to the teacher´s question.

In our opinion, this is an important function both in the discourse of the teacher and the pupils. The fact that the teacher reinforces an utterance can have important implications on the pupils´ comprehension and future production in the L2. In the case of the realisation of this function by the pupils, it helps them to achieve their communicative goals. It is very common that children reinitiate the communication when they don´t obtain any response. Garvey and Beringer (1981) observed that children between 2;10 and 5;7 tended to reinitiate their discourse through repetition one third of the times.

4. Methodology and Quantitative analysis

The data analysed for this study comes from an English school, where children were exposed to the L2 for the whole school day, and from a low-immersion bilingual school, where children were exposed to the L2 for one hour everyday. In both cases, the children were five years old. We recorded five sessions from two groups in the English school and one group in the low-immersion school. After transcribing and tagging each individual utterance in both the language of teachers and pupils, we identified 67 different functions (Llinares García 2002). In this particular study, we will focus on the functions realised through repetition.[5]

4.1. Self-repetition

Out of 67 functions codified in the corpus we show below how the function of self-repeating or self-reinforcing an utterance is one of the three most frequent functions in the language of both teachers and children in both groups, as shown in the tables below:

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[5] The Wordsmith tools were used to analyse the data, once it was tagged

Table 1: Three most common functions realised by the teachers in both the high and the low immersion contexts

Teacher/high-imm./Group A	Teacher/high-imm./Group B	Teacher/low-imm.
Marker of initiation of an utterance (S1) 11,88%	Open display questions (H3.bo) 10,71%	Self-repetition or reinforcement of an utterance (S2) 13,16%
Call somebody (R1) 11,10%	Self-repetition or reinforcement of an utterance (S2) 9,43%	Positive evaluation (TF2.a) 13,16%
Self-repetition or reinforcement of an utterance (S2) 10,01%	Ask somebody to perform an action (R3) 9,11%	Call somebody (R1) 10,32%

Table 2: Three most common functions realised by the pupils in the L2 in both the high and the low immersion contexts

Pupils/high-imm./Group A (L2)	Pupils/high-imm./Group B (L2)	Pupils/low-imm. (L2)
Call somebody (R1) 10,90%	Response to open display questions (H3.re.bo) 7,07%	Completion of the teacher´s request (RP2.re) 16,82%
Self-repetition or reinforcement of an utterance (S2) 8,79%	Call somebody (R1) 6,42%	Identify or describe people or things in the present (Inf1) 12,78%
Identify or describe (Inf1) 6,08%	Self-repetition or reinforcement of an utterance (S2) 6,06%	Call somebody (R1) 6,05%

Table 1 above shows that the function of self-repetition is among the three most common in the language of the three teachers, as we can expect from a classroom context, where teachers need to reinforce their message to make sure that the pupils understand. This function is even more necessary in the language of the teachers in EFL contexts. In our data, the teacher in the low-immersion context seems to perceive even more the need to reinforce the message, as it is the most common function. This function is also one of the most common in the language of the pupils in the high-immersion context.

4.2. The children´s response to the teacher´s feedback in the high-immersion context

An interesting result in the high-immersion context was to observe that one of the teachers used the function of feedback very frequently, encouraging the pupils to continue with their discourse, whereas the other teacher used it much less frequently. The teacher in group A uses this function 25 times against twice in the case of the teacher in group B. As we can see in the example below, children go on with their discourse when they are encouraged to do so

> *TCH: He does? Who kills him?*
>
> *CH: a bird, a bird kills him*
>
> *TCH: A bird kills him*
>
> *CH: It´s funny at the end because the grasshopper said, is that one another one of your tricks?*

The example below is one of the two that correspond to group B, and we can see that this function is not only realised through repetition:

CH1: ((native)) I I I saw a grasshopper in my garden

TCH: Did you?

CH2: Me too. I saw it when I was little

CH3: I saw one in the old school

A native pupil initiates this interaction, but once the teacher encourages going on, other non-native children participate.

4.3. The pupil´s imitation of the teacher´s utterances in the low-immersion context

In the case of the low-immersion context, we identified a type of repetition that was important to encourage the pupils´ discourse initiation: children´s imitation or repetition after the teacher´s request to do so. Llinares García (2002) classified the function of asking for repetition and asking for imitation within a group of three functions that were called *teacher pedagogic regulatory functions*. These included asking for imitation, asking for repetition and asking for completion. In this paper, we are only focusing on the first two, which are the ones that involve repetition. All these functions were much more frequently used by the teacher in the low-immersion EFL context, as we can see in figure 1 below. In figure 2, we can observe that the functions of asking to repeat and asking to imitate are not used at all in the high-immersion classes:

Figure 1: Use of the teacher pedagogic regulatory functions in the high and low-immersion contexts
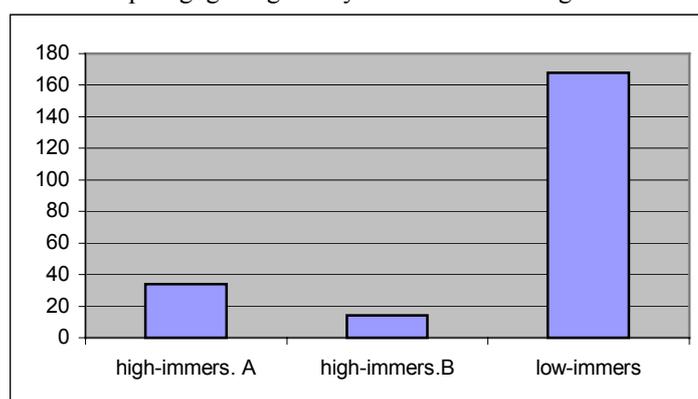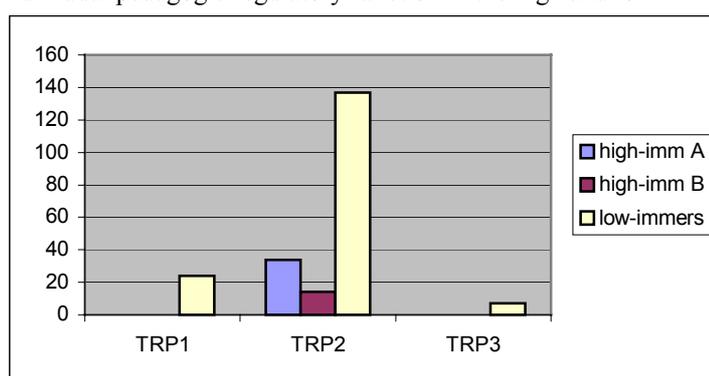

Figure 2: Use of each individual pedagogic regulatory function in the high and low-immersion contexts

The example below shows the importance of this function for the language development of children in low-immersion contexts:

TCH: Who said yellow? Okay. Is it yellow? Santiago, ask Luis.

CH1: Is it yellow?

CH2: No

TCH: Good boy.. No. It isn´t yellow <x......x> No.

CH2: No.

TCH: It isn´t yellow.

CH2: It isn´t yellow.

TCH: No. Good boy. Table three. Who´s going to ask a question in table three. Íñigo. Ask if it´s dangerous... Is it dangerous?

CH3: Is is dangeorus?

CH2: Is dangerous.

CH3: Can I go to the bathroom, please?

TCH:No. <x......x> Íñigo. W- wait <x till after x> class. Who wants to ask a question. Cristina, ask a question. What question would you like to ask?

CH4: Is it fast?

CH2: N o.

In the example above, we can observe how the teacher asks the pupils to repeat a question to find out the animal. At the end, we can see how one of the pupils asks the question herself without having to repeat the teacher´s question.

5. Conclusions

There are three main conclusions that we can raise in relation to the use of repetition in the EFL classroom contexts in our corpus:

- Self-repetition is a very common function in the language of the teacher, and it is the most common in the low-immersion EFL context. This surely implies that the teacher feels the need to reinforce the message to make sure that the pupils understand.

- In the high-immersion EFL context, pupils have the L2 knowledge to be able to express their messages in the L2. However, they need to be encouraged by their teacher. Therefore, we can see that, although both groups are exposed to the same hours of English, in one the pupils participate more in a spontaneous interaction, because the teacher motivates them to do so. Maybe we can conclude that the time of exposure to a language is a key point in child L2 acquisition, but it is also important the type of interaction promoted by the teacher.

- In low-immersion contexts, on the other hand, it is not enough to motivate the pupils to talk, as they don´t have the language level. Here, it is important for the teacher to carry out interactions based on repetitions and imitations, that will later make it easier for the children to initiate the discourse on their own and to express things with more autonomy.

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