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The Role of a Technology and a Classroom Activity for Improving EFL Learners' Oral Performance

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Abstract: The final goal of my research is to develop novel methods that support English as a foreign language (EFL) learners and to increase their English-speaking skills. In this paper, I describe the outline of a mobile application for self-study English-speaking, and also show a learning design which combines practice with the mobile application and a classroom pair work. I also discuss the role of both a technology and a classroom activity for improving English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' oral performance.

Keywords: Computer assisted language learning, oral task, pair work, reflection, oral performance

1. Introduction

The goal of my research is to develop novel methods that support English as a foreign language (EFL) learners and to increase their English-speaking skills. To achieve this goal, I have conducted two researches: (1) I have developed a Mobile Application for the Scaffolded summary speaking Task (MAST) in order to support learners practicing English-speaking by self-study and evaluated the effectiveness of the application on learners' oral fluency; and (2) I have proposed a learning design which combines self-study using MAST and a reflection activity in pairs in an English class, and have clarified the role of MAST and the pair work for improving learners' oral performance.

2. A Mobile Application for the Scaffolded Summary Speaking Task (MAST)

Muranoi (2007) stated the effectiveness of self-study summarizing method for improving oral fluency by using a speech production model (Levelt, 1989), which describes how people process information when speaking. Summarizing tasks offer learners what they would say (preverbal message) and what kind of words they would use (retrieval words from Lexicon), therefore the learners can concentrate on grammatical encoding, which might result in improving fluency. However, the effectiveness has not been investigated by comparing it with the method which does not promote grammatical encoding. In addition, learners used this method only once a month (Muranoi, 2007).

Therefore we developed MAST and evaluated the effectiveness in detail. The learning process using MAST includes the summarizing task and scaffolding practices. A learner reads an English newspaper article that is shown on the screen of MAST and explains its summary. After reading the article, and before summarizing it aloud, the learner conducts the scaffolding practices.

The main scaffolding practice is a short question and answer practice. In the practice, the learner needs to answer questions that are related to main points of the summary. MAST vocalizes the question, the learner answers it, and then MAST relays the sample answer and offers the next question, like a pseudo-interactive conversation with a virtual tutor. By repeating the step, the learner can both clarify the main points of the summary and modify her or his summary, and retain their motivation.

We have conducted an experiment to observe the effectiveness of MAST on learners' oral fluency by comparing oral fluency scores with the scores of the control group, which was offered only the opportunity of reading aloud tasks that did not focus on grammatical encoding.

The analysis revealed that MAST was effective for Repair fluency that was measured by counting repetitions. The participants using MAST were offered hints for summary points and words so that they were facilitated in grammatical encoding. As a result, they might have been able to process information grammatically faster when speaking, therefore repetitions for their speech became less frequent.

Although we found that MAST could improve learners' oral fluency in the former research, leaners need more help to reflect on their oral output. According to an interview with the participants who used MAST in the experiment, they tended to reflect on their speech in terms of fluency only. Swain (2005) indicated the importance of peers' feedback to test the listener's comprehension. Therefore, we need to combine the learning of MAST and activities with peers.

3. A Learning Design Combining Self-study with MAST and a Reflection in Pairs

In my latter research, I proposed a learning design that combines self-study with MAST and a reflection activity in pairs in an English class. In this design, learners practice English summary speaking by self-study using MAST, and after that they expound upon its summary to their peers and reflect on the summary in pairs, using a worksheet. The main purpose of my latter research is to clarify the role of technologies and the role of activities in a class in detail.

Using the worksheet of the learning design, a pair of learners conducted work reflection in the following processes. First, a learner offers a summary, which the learner practiced at home using MAST. During the speech, the peer listener draws a picture that shows what the peer could understand. Secondly, the speaker and the listener reflect on the speech. They check what the listener could understand and what she or he could not understand based on the picture. After that they discuss and write down other words, or phrases, that assisted the listener in comprehending more fully.

To observe the effectiveness, I conducted a similar experiment for the duration of four weeks and compared oral performance scores of this learning design with the scores of a preliminary experiment which offered neither scaffolding in MAST nor the paired reflection activity in a class. The analysis results revealed that the learning design was effective for improving learners' Structural Complexity (non-repeated words per the Analysis of Speech Unit). This result revealed that participants could add more words in one speech unit to express what they wanted to say.

As for the role of reflection activity, learners might gain strategies of how to search and use approximate words, or phrases, when they did not think of appropriate words, or phrases, to express what they wanted to say. In the reflection activity, the learners discussed better expression to the peer, which leads to reflection on concrete experience from a different perspective and construction of more abstract knowledge (Kolb, 1994). Therefore, learners might stretch the retrieval words from Lexicon.

In terms of the role of technologies for self-study, the scaffolding of MAST also has an important role in gaining such a strategy, because the scaffolding might develop readiness by activating knowledge regarding vocabularies that are related to the article. In other words, the scaffolding could lead to greater effectiveness with respect to gaining the strategies for accessing the Lexicon.

In future studies, I have to elaborate the learning design in order to facilitate learners in using the strategies acquired from reflection to the next learning activities. That might lead to more elaborate learning, such as self-regulated learning.

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