

Language Choice during Collaborative Task Interaction: A
case study of undergraduates in the Faculty of Management
and Finance, University of Colombo.

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Abstract

Interaction is a crucial component of collaborative tasks in the second language (L2) classroom as collaborative task interaction has been hypothesised to drive L2 learning and provide opportunities for practice of the L2. However, little research on language choice patterns and its motivations during student peer interaction has been done in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, existing research, both local and international, has not compared language choice patterns or its relationship to student motivation among participants of different L2 proficiency levels. Additionally very little research has investigated participant perspectives on this issue.

This research attempts to fill this gap, by means of a study which used a mixed methods case study approach. It focussed on interaction during speech tasks to isolate language choice patterns in this context across different proficiency levels in the L2. It additionally sought to identify the impetus behind language choice and participant perspectives on language choice.

The sample consisted of second year undergraduates of the Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Colombo. In total, 18 collaborative task interactions were recorded, 172 questionnaires were administered and 15 participants were interviewed. The data was analysed qualitatively along with a statistical analysis of questionnaire responses.

A major finding is that the first language (L1) of the students generally serves as the base code of interaction with the integration of lexical items from the L2 together with a rehearsed form of L2. Language choice patterns during collaborative speech task interactions were found to be fairly similar across language proficiency levels. This language choice pattern not only facilitates task accomplishment but also bestows other pragmatic and affective benefits. Additionally it was discovered that motivation for language choice is fuelled by a complex dynamic of pragmatic needs and affective factors; such as identity, language anxiety and accommodation: Significantly this dynamic varies according to the participant's proficiency level in the L2. A crucial finding is that participants are preoccupied by the need for accuracy and fluency which actually hinders L2 use. The study concludes that the inhibitive preoccupation with accuracy and fluency needs to be addressed and that the other affective factors need to be confronted. In addition, task designers need to be aware that cognitively demanding tasks will require the use of the L1 and or code switching.