

## Learning grammatical structures through collaborative activities in the L2 English classroom

### What the study is about and why this research is important

While interaction and feedback is often seen as a prerequisite for linguistic development in a second language (L2), L2 learners are often unable to provide each other with feedback during collaborative exercises. Recent lab-based studies have shown that collaborative activities with native speakers or advanced L2 speaking partners positively affects the number and accuracy of *wh*-questions produced by learners, even in the absence of feedback. Embedded in these collaborative activities were instances of priming, whereby the learners heard the target grammatical structure produced by their speaking partner and were given the opportunity to use the same structure in a new sentence as opposed to an alternative structure. This study investigated whether similar effects could be observed in a classroom setting. While learning about alternative medicine, Thai L2 English learners either completed collaborative grammatical priming activities targeting *wh*-questions with auxiliaries with their peers or followed the regular curriculum. The results show that those learners who carried out the grammatical priming activities subsequently produced more target structures than learners who followed the regular curriculum.

### What the researchers did

- 42 university-level L2 English learners with Thai as their native language participated in the study. The learners had a mean age of 18.6 years, had studied English for an average of 10.9 years, and none of them were English majors. The participants were from two intact classrooms; one class completed the collaborative priming activities (21 learners), the other followed the regular curriculum (21 learners).
- In week 5, the learners completed a test to evaluate their production of *wh*-questions with obligatory auxiliaries in English (e.g. *What did you do yesterday?* with the auxiliary *do* in past tense). The test was an information exchange activity: learners read short texts and asked a partner questions using a set of prompts (*heart/pump?*)
- During weeks 6 and 7, one class carried out 2 collaborative priming activities per week. The priming activities consisted of information exchange activities carried out in pairs. Learners received short reading passages or incomplete information tables, as well as questions that contained the target structure (*How do people damage their health?*) and question fragments (*how many/treatments?*). The order of questions and fragments was such that learner A asked a question just before learner B had to generate a question with the fragments. The class following the regular curriculum completed speaking activities not specifically targeting *wh*-questions.
- In weeks 8 and 12, all participants completed a second and third test similar to the pre-test in week 5 that re-evaluated their ability to produce English *wh*-questions.

### What the researchers found

- During the collaborative priming activities in weeks 6 and 7, learners consistently produced the questions using the prompts in the task. With the question fragments they were provided with, more than half of the questions (59%) they generated were target-like *wh*-questions supplying the obligatory auxiliary verb.
- During testing in weeks 8 and 12, the two classes differed in their production of target-like *wh*-questions: the priming group produced more target-like *wh*-questions than any other question forms, whereas the regular class mostly produced *wh*-questions without the required auxiliary verb. Additionally, the priming group produced an overall greater proportion of target-like *wh*-questions than the class that followed the regular curriculum.
- For the collaborative priming group, the learners' improvement on the posttests was related to the number of target *wh*-questions they had produced during the activities, as opposed to the number of prime questions they had heard or asked.

### Things to consider

- In this study, learners who interacted with peers in their L2 classroom benefitted from collaborative priming activities, even in the absence of feedback from the instructor or the speaking partner. This suggests that classroom activities that integrate collaborative priming activities into course content can be one effective way to promote linguistic development.
- While the results show a clear relationship between collaborative priming activities and the subsequent production of target-like *wh*-questions in English, the results of this study may not be generalizable to all grammatical structures or to languages other than L2 English.

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