

Comparing the learning opportunities of classroom interactions for Spanish heritage learners

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The interactionist approach to second language acquisition (SLA) is premised on the notion that conversational modifications during interaction promote second language development. Solid empirical support for this claim comes from a large base of both primary studies and meta-analyses (Mackey & Goo 2007; Plonsky & Gass 2011). Although most interaction research has focused on native speaker-learner interactions, there is a growing body of research on learner-learner interactions, which are particularly frequent in foreign language classrooms (Adams, 2007; Adams, Nuevo, & Egi, 2011). One particularly understudied variable is the role of language background (second language vs. heritage language) in learner-learner interactions (Bowles & Adams, in press). This is a particularly important variable to examine, given that L2 and heritage language (HL) learners are enrolled together in the majority of US university Spanish language classes (Beaudrie, 2012).

This talk presents the findings of the limited previous research involving HL learners in learner-learner dyads (Bowles, 2011; Bowles, Adams, & Toth, 2014) and presents a study comparing 12 HL-HL dyads and 12 L2-HL dyads, all of whom were audio-recorded while they completed a series of written and oral Spanish language tasks. Language-related episodes (LREs), or instances of attention to linguistic form that arise in the context of communication (Williams, 1999) were identified in the transcribed recordings. The dyads were compared in terms of number and linguistic focus of LREs, as well as initiation and resolution of LREs. Preliminary results indicate that when heritage learners are paired with other HL learners, their LREs more often go unresolved or are resolved in a non-targetlike way than when they are paired with L2 learners. These results are interpreted in light of differences in the nature of the two groups' linguistic knowledge and discussed in terms of their pedagogical implications.