

## Engagement With Language: The utility of an under-utilized research construct

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## Engagement With Language:

The utility of an under-utilized research construct

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### Abstract:

In task-based language teaching, it is now recognized that alongside communicative tasks, there needs to be some degree explicit of focus-on-form. Svalberg (2009) has proposed the conceptual construct of *engagement with language* (EWL) as a framework for exploring how learners build their language awareness. To date, however, only a handful of SLA studies have utilized the EWL construct. This article aims to persuade language teachers/researchers of the potential utility the EWL framework holds for better investigating the efficacy of form-focused tasks and advocates for its more widespread use as a research construct.

### 1. Introduction

That interactive tasks are a necessary component of a language programme—especially in contexts where opportunities to interact in (or with) the target language outside the programme are scarce—is uncontroversial. Definitions of a ‘task’, while varied, usually stress that tasks are activities that focus learner attention on the communication of meanings. For example, Nunan’s (1989: 10) oft cited definition a task is:

... a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form.

Proponents of task-based language teaching (TBLT) posit that a student’s *learning* of linguistic forms—not merely their ‘practice’—stems from performing tasks. Long (e.g., 1996, 2006) posits that breakdowns in communication between interlocutors during task performance will lead learners to ‘negotiate meaning’ during which they focus on form. Learners may also ‘notice a hole’ in their L2 knowledge, “even without implicit or explicit feedback provided from an interlocutor about the learners’ output, learners may still, on occasion, notice a gap in their own knowledge when they encounter a problem in trying to produce the L2” (Swain and Lapkin, 1995, p. 373). As a learner’s output represents their best hypothesis as to how something should be said or written in the L2, an interlocutor’s reaction to the output can indicate to the learner that their hypothesis is erroneous (Swain, 1995). Such interlocutor feedback, whether implicit or explicit, would lead the learner to ‘notice the gap’ between their output and the TL norms

(Schmidt and Frota, 1986). Finally, learners' attempts to produce comprehensible and accurate output can trigger a 'meta-linguistic' function "when a learner explicitly reflects on their hypotheses about the L2 using language to do so" (Swain, 1995, p. 132).

## 2. Languageing

Swain (2000) coined the term 'collaborative dialogue' to describe instances where learners work together to solve linguistic problems they encounter when producing L2 output. Collaborative dialogue entails 'languageing', a term Swain uses to cover the meta-talk process "of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (2006, p. 98). Languageing can be entirely self-directed, for example, when a learner talks to themselves whilst working alone on a complex language task. However, when produced while working with peers, self-directed languageing becomes public, and interlocutors may then, for example, ask the learner to further explain or justify their ideas or see a learner's self-directed questions as signals for assistance (Swain and Lapkin, 2002). In other words, self-directed languageing may initiate collaborative dialogue. In SLA research, collaborative dialogue and languageing is usually examined in relation to 'language-related episodes' (LREs) which are instances where "students talk about the a specific item of language they are producing, question their language use, or other- or self-correct" (Swain, 1998, p. 70).

## 3. Languageing tasks

SLA literature is mixed as to how frequently learners actually produce LREs when performing communicative tasks. Some research suggests that learners do so often (e.g. Adams, 2007; McDonough and Mackey, 2000; Mackey, Oliver, & Leeman, 2003); other research finds that learners rarely produce LREs (e.g. Foster, 1998; Garcia-Mayo and Pica, 2000; Leese, 2004; Philp, Walter, and Basturkmen, 2010; Williams, 1999, 2001). Furthermore, although breakdowns in communication during task performance will lead learners to focus on form, studies have found that such breakdowns occur infrequently in the classroom (e.g., Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen, 2001; Foster, 1998). In the absence of breakdowns in communication, learners may simply not feel it socially appropriate to point out errors they notice in their interlocutor's production. Typically, when students perform communicative tasks, "meaning is focused on and error is ignored in an attempt to create an effective social interaction" (Swain, 2000, p.107). Therefore, as Skehan *et al.* (2012, p. 171) note:

The idea that [communicative] tasks in themselves contain all that is needed for sustained second language development has been discredited, and it is now recognized that within or alongside tasks, there needs to be some degree of focus-on-form.

Broadly speaking, there are two approaches to providing a focus on language alongside what Ellis (2003) calls *unfocused* tasks (those not designed to specifically foster languageing). The first is to take a pre-emptive approach and employ *focused* tasks designed to elicit the processing and discussion of specific

pre-determined linguistic features (ibid). Such consciousness raising tasks (Ellis, 1991) make pre-selected linguistic features the topic of the task. The second approach is to take a reactive approach to focus on form by having learners notice ‘problematic’ language features that arose from their performances of unfocused tasks. Having learners work together to review and revise their writing would be one example; having learners listen to and revise the language contained in transcripts of their oral production would be another. The above activities can be considered ‘tasks’ as learners are focused on working together and communicating to ‘solve’ the linguistic problems they posed, and as Ellis (2017, p. 511) rightfully notes, “one can make language the topic of talk just like any other topic”.

That ‘languageing’ results in learning is well established; however, the quality of the languageing is important. Storch (2008) and Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) investigated the effect the quality of meta-talk when languageing about linguistic choices had on subsequent learning outcomes. Both studies employed a process-product research design with instances of language amendments or revisions made to written texts by pairs were subsequently amended/revise the same way on a similar task performed individually taken as evidence of language learning. LREs from the recorded pair-talk data were coded in terms of their grammatical/lexical foci and whether the LREs evidenced ‘elaborate’ or ‘limited’ cognitive engagement. Elaborate engagement was operationalized as instances of joint LRE resolution involving deliberation and discussion of language items. Limited engagement was operationalized as instances where LREs were resolved perfunctorily without deliberation or discussion (i.e., a learner simply said what the revision should be). Both studies found elaborate/extensive engagement resulted in more instances of learning than did limited engagement. Swain et al. (2009) also reported that ‘high languageers’ who produced more and better quality LREs, demonstrated greater depth of understanding and had higher scores in post-tests than ‘low languageers’.

#### 4. Engagement with language

The studies of learner languageing consistently uncover considerable variability in learners’ willingness to ‘language’. Svalberg (2009, 2012) proposes the construct of *engagement with language* (EWL) as a framework for exploring why form-focused tasks are more successful with some learners than others at promoting languageing. Svalberg conceptualizes EWL as both a behavioral process and a mental state. EWL is a threefold construct with which to investigate the cognitive, social, and affective factors that affect (positively or negatively) the attention learners pay towards language. Svalberg (2009, p. 249) defines EWL as:

In the context of language learning and use, Engagement with language (Engagement) is a cognitive, and/or affective, and/or social state and a process in which the learner is the agent and language is the object.

The cognitive, affective, and social aspects of EWL of course overlap and (as shown below) affect each other, but the separation provides a viable framework for separating the “facilitators and impediments of EWL according to the three types of Engagement outcomes they affect” (2009, p. 255). The framework further allows for the various observations from extant research into learner languageing and

peer-interaction to be collated under a single construct. Such a collation and further illustration of the EWL construct is provided below.

#### 4.1. Cognitive engagement

Cognitive engagement refers to focused attention to form, the directing of cognitive resources, and problem solving. An individual highly cognitively engaged with language “is alert, pays focused attention and constructs their own knowledge” (Svalberg, 2009, p. 246), and that a state of heightened cognitive engagement will manifest in a process of focused reflection and problem solving (p. 255).

Observable indicators of cognitive engagement include learner-articulation of comparisons, questions, and the drawing of inferences or conclusions about the target language. To elicit such behaviours, however, tasks intended to promote EWL need to be successful in presenting students with ‘problems’ which will actually need discussion to resolve. There are numerous examples from SLA studies of tasks whose demands failed to pose learners with such problems.

Storch (2008) investigated the effect the quality of learner cognitive engagement with linguistic choices had on LRE resolution. The researcher asked 11 pairs of advanced ESL learners to complete a text reconstruction task (i.e., attempted to produce a meaningful and grammatically accurate text by inserting the deliberately missing function words and changing the word forms). Supplying the correct text amendments for the targeted linguistic features often appeared largely unproblematic; for example, only 24% (16/67) of LREs involving choice of prepositions showed elaborate/extensive engagement, because these were “were fairly easy for these advanced learners” (p. 108).

Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) compared how learners discussed direct teacher corrective-feedback (reformulations) versus indirect feedback (editing symbols) directed towards language errors contained in the learners’ pair compositions. Like Storch (2008), the study drew a distinction between LREs that showed ‘extensive’ vs. limited engagement. Editing symbols were found to have elicited far more incidences of extensive cognitive engagement than direct teacher feedback (reformulation) which was found to usually generate limited engagement where one member of the pair simply read the feedback and the other repeated/acknowledged it. The researchers suggest the differences in cognitive engagement can be accounted by the fact that indirect feedback still demands learners formulate corrections themselves; whereas, as one pair of learners was recorded putting it, reformulations “give away the answers” and leave learners nothing to do other than “just memorize” the feedback. In short, direct feedback appeared to have left learners less room or reason to construct their own knowledge.

#### 4.2 Social Engagement

Social engagement refers to the quality of students’ participation in the classroom which is “essentially linked to interaction and to learners’ initiation and maintenance (or not) of it” (Svalberg, 2009, p. 252). Svalberg posits that socially, a learner fully engaged with language is interactive and initiating (2009, p. 247).

The importance of learners being initiating and interactive is highlighted by studies that have employed Storch’s (2002) framework for identifying ‘patterns of dyadic interaction’. Storch’s framework looks at two key aspects of interaction: equality and mutuality. ‘Equality’ refers “to the degree of control or

authority over the task” with higher degrees of equality evidenced by “interactions where both participants take directions from each other” (Storch, 2002, p. 127). ‘Mutuality’ refers to the amount learners engage with each other’s contributions and “interactions that are rich in reciprocal feedback and a sharing of ideas” characterize high mutuality (ibid.).

Using these indices of equality and mutuality, Storch identified four patterns of dyadic interaction:

- I. The collaborative pattern evidenced relatively high degrees of both equality and mutuality and emerged when both learners in a pair were initiating and interactive. Learners were relatively equal in terms of initiation of discussions with both learners willing to engage with each other’s ideas, to provide feedback, explanations and suggest alternative suggestions.
- II. The expert/novice pattern evidenced relatively low equality with one pair member assuming or being afforded the role of expert who led the task by initiating most discussions. However, this pattern also showed relatively high mutuality with both participants being interactive.
- III. The dominant/passive pattern evidenced low levels of both equality and mutuality. The dominant member of such dyads appropriated the task; initiated most suggestions; and made little attempt to involve the other learner or seek their contributions. Little negotiation or discussion ensued because the passive participant made few challenges or contributions (usually limited to mere echoic repetitions of the dominant member’s suggestions).
- IV. The dominant/dominant pattern evidenced high equality with both learners initiating meta-talk and making suggestions, but low mutuality as learners appeared unwilling to engage with each other’s suggestions. Discourse was marked by disagreement and learners tended to disregard each other’s suggestions.

Storch (2002) found that learners whose interactions evidenced a collaborative or expert/novice pattern showed more transfer of knowledge to subsequent individually performed tasks than did learners whose interactions were dominant/passive or dominant/dominant. Subsequent studies (e.g., Moranski and Toth, 2016; Sato and Ballinger, 2012; Storch, 2008; Toth et al., 2013) have found further evidence that learners are more effective in language learning when they listen to one another and draw upon one another’s ideas; that is, when there is evidence of a high degree of social

### 4.3 Affective Engagement

Whereas, cognitive and social engagement by-in-large addresses EWL as a process (i.e., learning behaviors), affective engagement addresses EWL as a state; that is, the factors internal to the learner—attitudes, opinions, and emotions—that facilitate or impede EWL. Svalberg (2009) posits that, affectively, individuals fully/highly engaged with language will possess a “positive orientation towards the language, the task, and task interlocutors and/or what they represent” and whose “willingness to interact with the language, task, and/or interlocutor is maintained/heightened” throughout the EWL process (p. 255).

That learner predispositions can either impede or facilitate EWL is clearly demonstrated in Sato (2017) who investigated how learners’ predispositions towards task and interlocutors impacted languaging between peers. The study involved 10 Chilean high school EFL learners who each had been interviewed about their attitudes towards L2 group work (e.g., Do you think you and your classmates can help each other to learn English?); peer corrective feedback (e.g., Do you feel comfortable correcting your

classmate's mistakes?); and interacting in the L2 (e.g., Do you enjoy talking to your classmates in English?). These learners then performed a series of collaborative language-focused tasks in two groups of five. In one of the groups, four out of the five learners had expressed in the prior interviews that they felt group-work fun to be fun and beneficial for L2 learning; the remaining student, however, felt group work in the L2 to be socially awkward. Analysis of this group's interaction found that the four learners who had indicated a positive orientation towards group-work evidenced fluid turn taking, collective scaffolding, and engagement with each other's suggestions and feedback. The remaining student, in contrast, did not participate at all in discussions about language (although it is not specified what, if any, efforts the others had made to include her). The other group of 5 students, however, was comprised of students had expressed a universal skepticism regarding both the learning benefits of L2 group-work, or indeed the benefits of studying English at all. Compared to the first group, these learners engaged in discussions of language far less frequently and displayed marked disengagement with each other's ideas and feedback.

While a learner's extant dispositions mediate their willingness to engage with language, other affective facilitators and impediments to EWL may only emerge during task performance. Storch (2004), in a follow up to her (2002) study on the patterns of interaction, found that peer collaboration required that learners have a shared or compatible understanding of the task's purpose. Interview data revealed the learners in the collaborative and expert/novice pairs all perceived the purpose of the assigned tasks as having been to contribute to task completion to the best of their ability and share resources and help each other to do so. In contrast, the overriding goal for both learners in the dominant/dominant dyad was to display their own L2 knowledge which led to interaction that was competitive rather than collaborative. As for the dominant/passive pair, the dominant participant's purpose was to complete the task as efficiently as possible and saw appropriating the task as the best means of doing so. The passive interlocutor, on the other hand, had no clear idea about what her role should have been in the tasks.

A lack of trust between learners has also been shown as another affective factor that impedes EWL. Watanabe and Swain (2007) report the case of one learner who interacted collaboratively when discussing language with a more proficient partner, but who dominated interaction when paired with a less proficient learner. Post-task interviews, reported in Watanabe (2008), revealed that this learner's unwillingness to engage with his lower proficiency partner was attributable to his having little trust the less-proficient partner's ability to play a legitimate role during their interaction. Conversely, learners are unlikely to attempt to engage if they feel their input is not valued by their task partners.

## 5. Two examples of EWL research

The EWL framework provides a principled means of evaluating whether, to what degree, with whom, and why or why not a given language-focused task "works" and thereby inform teachers (and researchers) as to how to design more effective tasks. More broadly, the construct allows for principled investigation into how exploration of how language awareness is constructed by learners. Despite the potential utility of EWL as a research tool, it appears only a very small handful of researchers have employed—as opposed to merely referencing—the EWL construct the overarching research construct of their studies.

After a search of the following research databases: ERIC (ProQuest), Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus,

and SpringerLink, the author only found four such studies: Baralt, Gurzynski-Weiss, and Kim (2016); Boston (2019); Kearney and Ahn (2013); and Nguyen (2017). The Boston (2019) and Baralt *et al.* (2016) studies are presented below as examples of researcher's using the EWL construct 'in action'. These studies were chosen because they concerned post-secondary foreign (as opposed to 'second') language education contexts and likely to be of most interest to the readers of this journal.

### 5.1 Boston (2019)

This study investigated the EWL of eight Japanese learners of intermediate L2 (English) proficiency as they worked in pairs to revise verbatim transcripts of each other's deliveries of debate position speeches. Students performed three such "Transcript Revision Tasks" (TRTs) over the course of a 15-week semester. The purpose of the study was to investigate the quality of EWL that learners manifested when performing TRTs and the effect differences in quality of engagement had on the retention of revisions.

#### 5.1.1 Research method

Transcripts of learners' interactions when performing TRTs were analysed and the LREs pairs produced identified and matched to the corresponding linguistic features being discussed and revised. A system for coding LREs was designed so that the LREs could be analysed to gauge learners' cognitive and social EWL. LREs were coded for the following:

#### Focus and outcome

Focus of LRE	Revisions of (1) discrete grammar features, (2) lexical features, or (3) wholesale reformulation of sentence or clause.
Outcome of LRE	LRE/Revision rendered language: (1) inaccurate→accurate, (2) accurate→inaccurate, (3) inaccurate→inaccurate, (4) accurate→accurate, or (5) LRE was unresolved

#### Cognitive EWL (Quality of metatalk)

Measure	Operationalization
Limited metatalk	An LRE in which a suggested revision was accepted without explanation/justification being provided or sought.
Extended metatalk	An LRE in which an explanation/justification revision was provided or sought, and/or alternative revisions were considered and deliberated.

#### Social EWL (Patterns of participation)

Measure	Operationalization
Self-initiation & resolution	LRE both initiated and resolved by the <i>learner</i> whose transcript was being revised.
Other-initiation & resolution	LRE both initiated and resolved by the <i>partner</i> of the learner whose transcript was being revised.
Joint participation	LRE involved <i>co-resolution</i> where pair-members made suggestions, counter-suggestions, and deliberated among options. <i>OR</i> An LRE initiated by one pair member and resolved by the other.



In addition to coding of LREs, end-of-semester interviews were held with participants to elicit their perceptions of working together on TRTs to investigate affective factors that impeded/facilitated cognitive and social engagement.

To investigate the effect EWL had on learning of revised language features, learners' performances of their initial deliveries of speeches were compared to re-deliveries of the same speech one week after each TRT (i.e., Lesson 1: Initial delivery and transcription of speech → Lesson 2: TRT → Lesson 3: redeliveries of speeches). The ability to retain the revision in the re-deliveries was used as an indicator of learning.

### 5.1.2 Findings

Cognitive EWL. The most LREs (89%) resulted in accurate revision regardless of quality of metatalk and the majority (65%) of revisions were products of limited metatalk. One factor which appeared to explain the generally low proportion of extended metatalk seemed inherent to the tasks themselves. By far the most common language features learners noticed were discrete grammar forms: 69% of LREs had addressed grammar but only 30% of these concerning involved extended metatalk. In the main, the grammar features were simple, usually morphological (and only involving one word), and often concerned noun plurals, subject-verb agreement, or changes to verb tense or aspect. These types of grammatical inaccuracies were likely performance-pressure related slips or mistakes rather than errors ('errors' being misunderstandings of the TL system) caused by having had to deliver relatively impromptu speeches.

Social EWL. Nearly half (48%) of all revisions had been made by the learners whose transcripts were being revised without *any* involvement on the part of the revision-partner. In addition, only approximately a third (31%) of LREs had involved of joint-participation and less than a quarter (22%) of had been co-resolved, that is, where learners had made suggestions, counter-suggestions, pooled linguistic resources, and deliberated over the best revision to make.

However, there was significant disparity in cognitive and social EWL between learner-pairs. Two pairs each produced *twice* the number of LREs manifesting extended metatalk than each of the other two pairs. Correspondingly, the pairs producing more episodes of extended metatalk also produced nearly twice the number of LREs that were the product of joint-participation and co-resolution as compared to either of the remaining pairs. As the number, types, and proportion of types of inaccurate language items learners noticed were similar across the transcripts of all eight learners, these task factors alone could not adequately account for the notable differences cognitive and social EWL.

Affective EWL. During interviews, the more cognitively/socially engaged learners all expressed the belief that that having a partner when revising transcripts increased and enhanced opportunities for learning. The perceived learning benefits articulated by these learners were that peers could identify mistakes they could not and that peers could teach or expose them to new vocabulary and grammar.

In contrast, the less engaged learners believed that there was 'nothing new' they could learn from reading and correcting each other's transcripts because, as Japanese learners, they shared the same educational background and therefore made the same type of errors. These learners also expressed the idea that they could only notice the same types of errors. One learner additionally felt that even when students make *different* errors, students cannot make use of the corrections made to a partner's transcripts for their

own benefit. However, the biggest impediment to EWL for one pair was their inability to see agree upon whether making revisions purely for the sake of style fell within the confines of the tasks: one learner did, but his suggested stylistic revisions were consistently rejected by his partner. Interview data showed this to be a rather complex disagreement involving issues of autonomy and control which ultimately led to these learners to disengage socially and no longer seek or offer each other assistance in the revision process.

In sum, the interview data revealed that most the significant factor underlying differences in cognitive and social EWL were learners' perceptions regarding the merits and parameters of peer-editing, rather than the nature of the linguistic features being revised.

*Learning outcomes of EWL (Retention of revisions).* The findings from the revision-retention data showed that the ability to retain a revision one week later was affected by the quality of metatalk that had been involved in the making the revision. Of the 350 transcript revisions identified as having had occasions for use in the redeliveries of speeches, 74% (98/132) of revisions that had involved extended metatalk were retained versus only 41% (90/220) of revisions that involved limited metatalk. A chi-square test of independence with a Yates correction factor was performed and the effect of quality of metatalk on retention of revisions was found significant: the  $p$ -value was .0056 and significant at  $p < 0.05$ ). The results indicated that EWL that led to deliberation or explanation of language when making a revision ('extended metatalk') had been superior in terms of short-term retention-*cum*-learning gains than EWL resulting in 'limited' metatalk. However, while the effect of quality of metatalk on retention of revisions was statistically significant, the overall effect-size the quality of metatalk had on retention was found to be quite modest. Only 15 more revisions were retained due to having been the product of extended metatalk than would have been expected by random chance.

## 5.2 Baralt, Gurzynski-Weiss, and Kim (2016)

Boston (2019) was a more 'traditional' peer interaction study in that—while employing the EWL construct—LREs remained the main unit for analysis of interaction. In contrast, Baralt *et al.* rejected using LREs as units for analysis on the grounds that they focus too narrowly on the noticing of linguistic forms and thus focus primarily on cognitive EWL and inadequately allows for examination of the other aspects of EWL that impact performance of language-focused tasks. How the researchers used the EWL construct to investigate learners' EWL processes *and* learning outcomes without reference to learners' LREs is shown below.

Baralt *et al.*'s study set out to examine why a language-focused task that they had observed to promote attention to form in face-to-face (FTF) classrooms that had been found prior to the study to be ineffective in an online environment when performed via synchronous computer-mediated chat (SCMC). The participant were 40 monolingual native speakers of English enrolled in two versions of the same intermediate Spanish as a foreign language classes: 20 learners taking the course in a FTF classroom; the other 20 online.

### 5.2.1 Research method

Both the learners in the FTF and SCMC environment undertook the same task. The task was a dialogic

story retell which participants performed in pairs. Pairs first read the story written in their L1 (English), the story was then taken away and pairs were asked to retell the story together in Spanish to produce a jointly composed written/typed version of the story in Spanish.

The English version of the story related what the story's two characters did, said, and were thinking (e.g., "He doubted he could do it"). To assist in the retelling of the story, cards with pictures and a limited number of select key Spanish content words (nouns and verbs) were provided as memory aids. Pairs were instructed that their stories must explain what the characters did and *why* (e.g., "John did X because he was angry that Mary...."). To do this in the Spanish language necessitates the use of the *Spanish past subjunctive* which was targeted linguistic form of the task and research study. Two days prior to the study, all learners had received instruction in the targeted structure, but had yet to have communicative practice of the form.

Learners' pair-interactions FTF interactions and online chats were recorded and analyzed for evidence of cognitive and social EWL. In lieu of identifying and coding LREs, the researchers looked for 'EWL episodes' in the interaction data. The 'key characteristics of engagement' in terms of state and process at the cognitive and social levels were taken from Svalberg (2009) (see section 4, above for examples) and grouped into a table of EWL rubrics. The portions of each pair's dialogues manifesting these EWL characteristics were then matched to the corresponding rubric and tallied in a table for each pair. Affective EWL data was gathered by the post-task administration of a written, open-ended response questionnaire regarding participants perceptions of the task. Learner's individual responses were then matched to each pair.

### 5.2.2 Findings

The study found far more cognitive and social episodes of EWL for the 20 learners in the FTF condition than the 20 in the SCMC. The interaction in the FTF condition far more frequently evidenced mutual encouragement, feedback and discussion of proposed L2 language use, and linguistic scaffolding (i.e., helping partner to complete their L2 utterances) than their SCMC peers. The most common mode of interaction amongst SCMC pairs was to take turns with one interlocutor producing a portion of the story which the other typed without response or feedback. Unlike the FTF group, Baralt *et. al* reported signs of socialization being nearly absent in the SCMC data.

Learners in the SCMC group attributed their lack of EWL to their having had somewhat limited prior interactions with their peers and, therefore, feeling awkward, anxious, and disconnected from their partners. Additionally, many expressed feeling that their partner didn't really care about working with them. These learners were probably correct: 8/20 learners mentioned that they had elected to take the course online because they preferred to work autonomously.

As for learning outcomes, 8/10 pairs in the FTF environment explicitly articulated that the targeted form (subjunctive) was needed to tell the story, hypothesized together what the correct past-tense subjunctive form might be, and by-in-large produced the form correctly. By stark contrast, not a single learner in the SCMC group explicitly referenced or reflected upon subjunctive morphology and were less frequently able to produce it correctly. The researchers concluded that the SCMC environment both created this lack of 'trust' and 'social connections' and exacerbated a lack of cognitive EWL causing the task to be

less successful in the online condition.

## 6. Summary

One purpose of this article was to illustrate the need for language-focused tasks in TBLT courses. Another was to illustrate and expose reader to Svalberg's (2009, 2012) *engagement with language* construct. My main purpose, however, is to persuade readers of the potential the EWL construct has for investigating how learners build their language awareness (or not) and for evaluating to what extent a language-focused task "works".

The studies by Baralt *et al.* (2016) and Boston (2019) were summarized to provide examples of teacher/researchers attempting to use EWL conceptual construct as their research construct. However—perhaps unsurprisingly given the limited number of studies that have attempted to operationalize the EWL for practical research/pedagogic purposes—Baralt *et al.* and Boston employed rather different approaches to investigating learner EWL. Nonetheless, both studies found that the more affective and social engagement, the more cognitive engagement learners demonstrated, and the better language appeared to be learned.

In conclusion, therefore, I enjoin my fellow language teachers to seriously consider trialing the EWL construct to investigate the efficacy of the language-focused tasks they employ in their classrooms. It holds potential to better inform practitioners and researchers how to design more effective tasks, and future studies would likely modify and better the few extant attempts to research learners' language engagement.

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