A Review of Collaborative Learning: Focus on Form as Communicative Approach to Second Language Learning

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the approach called *focus on form* (FonF) has been positively introduced into the fields of second language (L2) education and research. This approach is distinguished from the two traditional language teaching approaches: *focus on forms* (FonFs), and *focus on meaning* (FonM). While FonFs aims at teaching linguistic features (i.e., formal linguistic items) in isolation and FonM emphasizes improving learners' communicative ability without teaching such elements, FonF takes both linguistic form and meaning into account (Long & Robinson, 1998). That is, FonF is a new instructional approach where both form (i.e., grammar) and meaning (i.e., communication) are focused in a balanced manner.

The interest in FonF motivates research on interaction involving L2 learners in pair and small-group work (see Pica, 1994 for a review) because in instruction on the basis of FonF, verbalization and noticing by learners are valued (Swain, 1995). According to Schmidt (1990, 1993), input is not integrated into learners' developing interlanguage system unless it is noticed. Collaborative work, therefore, is seen to be useful because it entails utterances of learners.
which prompt noticing. However, whereas many studies (McDonough, 2004; Storch, 1999, 2005, 2007; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007; Swain, 1998, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Wigglesworth & Stroch, 2009) emphasize the importance of learners' interaction and collaborative learning, the relationship between collaborative learning and second language acquisition (SLA) still remains to be unclear because these studies were not carried out to examine such an important issue. In other words, little light has been shed on the relationship between collaboration and learning in spite of its importance. Hence, one question arises: does collaborative learning really lead to effective L2 learning?

This paper aims to conduct a review of previous studies employing the FonF approach and indicate directions for further research on collaborative learning. The next section introduces the historical background of the three language teaching approaches, providing the limitations and the educational implications of each approach. The third section reviews collaborative learning as a communicative language-learning method especially as task-based language learning, in terms of two major theoretical accounts: the psycholinguistic and the sociocultural perspectives. The forth section discusses the matter concerning the relationship between learners' collaboration and L2 learning, and suggests the limitations of collaborative learning and directions for future research.

2. The historical background in language teaching

Focus on forms:

FonFs is referred to as the traditional language teaching method, which
emphasizes linguistic forms, such as lexis and grammar. In this position, language instructors or syllabus designers analyze a target language (TL) or an L2 usually in the form of a pedagogical grammar. Depending on their analysis, the L2 is divided down into discrete linguistic items, such as phonemes, lexis, grammar rules, and notions or functions. These items are arranged according to their frequency or difficulty, and L2 learners learn them, item by item. Pedagogical materials and instruction are designed to practice a series of linguistic items or forms. In the classroom employing the FonFs approach, language teachers determine teaching linguistic items and its order. In regard to this point, the traditional language teaching method can be said to be teacher-centered. In practice or communication, L2 learners are expected to synthesize the pieces of linguistic items. Therefore, Wilkins (1976) called the traditional forms-focused method as the synthetic approach. Under the ideas of the synthetic approach, learners should 'get it right from the beginning' so that they will not make errors (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Since FonFs is strict about learners' errors, it is thought to be the error-avoiding teaching or the preventive pedagogy.

The typical ways of teaching associated with FonFs are the Grammar Translation Method and the Audiolingual Method. Literally, the Grammar Translation Method is the instruction method which gives weight to grammar and translation. All in all, teachers conduct classes centering on explanation of grammar in learners' first language (L1) and translation of English sentences. The Grammar Translation Method has prevailed for a long time, but there is no
special theoretical background. In contrast, the Audiolingual Method is based on both structural linguistics which emphasizes linguistic structures, and behaviorist psychology which regards language acquisition as habit formation. Instruction based on the Audiolingual Method involves practice and mechanical drills, such as repetition and pattern practice. Under the concept Habit Formation (Skinner, 1957), language acquisition is considered to be reinforced by successive repetition of stimulus and response.

A crucial issue, however, is whether the knowledge that learners obtain from such synthetic methods and practices is beneficial for use in real communication. In this regard, SLA research has shown harsh consequences for the FonFs approach. In fact, learners in the context with the traditional language teaching seem to be unable to use their knowledge in communication in which semantic content is central. This is because, from the perspective of psycholinguistics, language acquisition requires constructing the close network between form, meaning, and function of the language. Without such network, people would not be able to handle the language in practical communicative situations.

Mechanical drills and practice carried out in the traditional method stress the form-form connection just like symbolic processing, and understate the form-meaning connection. Therefore, no matter how much learners have form-focused practice, it does not lead to practical communicative competence. In addition, the FonFs approach ignores the development of learners' interlanguage (Selinker, 1972), which refers to learners' developing L2 knowledge. Research
shows that there are fairly universal developmental sequences when language learners learn certain important grammatical features (e.g., Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Pienemann et al, 1988). Pienemann’s (1998) Processability Theory, for example, explains such universal developmental sequences in terms of a set of processing procedures. Pienemann claims that grammatical operations that learners are capable of processing vary depending on stages of their language development, and developmental sequences are determined by processing difficulty. For instance, learners of English acquire the progressive -ing earlier than the simple past -ed or the third person singular -s because the progressive is based on a simpler and clearer rule, and easier to process than and the simple past and the third person singular. In other words, Processability Theory claims that use for the language demands the development of processing ability, not conceptual understandings of grammar. Hence, it is inevitable that learners make errors in developing their interlanguage system; their errors are rather seen as evidence for or indication of what stage the learner are at in their development of L2 acquisition.

Lightbown and colleagues (Lightbown, 1998; Spada & Lightbown, 2006) point out that learners are able to use their grammatical knowledge only when they are in the same situation as their learning contexts. If their learning contexts are far from communication, their knowledge does not activate for use in communicative situations. Segalowitz (2000) gives an account of such a phenomenon from the cognitive psychological perspective, with the principle of transfer-appropriate learning, which assumes that “a learning condition will be
transfer appropriate if it activates cognitive operations that are likely to be reinstated later when the individual attempts to put the learning into practice” (p.213). In other words, it is quite difficult to use linguistic knowledge that learners acquire by understanding and practicing grammar, when they encounter real communicative conditions. The kind of cognitive processing that occurs while performing language learning tasks should be similar to the kind of processing involved during communicative language use. Such arguments create the tendency to depart from the FonF's approach in the L2 classroom, and provide the rationale of communication-driven language teaching.

**Focus on meaning**

After moving away from decontextualized grammar-focused instruction, SLA researchers and teachers went forward into FonM. It is widely acknowledged as a “communicative approach” to language teaching and learning. Communicative language teaching places emphasis on meaning and content, and regards the language as a tool for communication. The fundamental claim of this approach is that incidental and implicit L2 learning from exposure to comprehensible L2 input is sufficient for successful SLA, just as in the cases of L1 acquisition by young children (Krashen, 1985). FonM, such as Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), values natural language acquisition processes; it is represented by content-based instruction and immersion education which treats the language not as an object of study, but as a medium of communication. In sum, learners learn the language not just for communication,
but through communication. Moreover, communicative language teaching requires L2 learners to analyze linguistic input and understand forms and patterns that occur in natural communication. FonM, therefore, is described as the analytic method (Wilkins, 1976).

For the theoretical framework, FonM relies on the Input Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1982, 1985). The Input Hypothesis suggests that exposure to comprehensible input is both necessary and sufficient for language acquisition. Comprehensible input is defined as input that contains a structure that is a little beyond the current level of linguistic competence of language learners, and learners are able to understand overall meaning rather than form of the input. If \( i \) represents their current level of linguistic competence, they move from \( i \) to \( i+1 \), namely the next level along the natural order, by understanding input that contains \( i+1 \). The Input Hypothesis claims that language is acquired by understanding comprehensible input sequentially. Besides, two further ideas linked to the hypothesis are indicated: (1) speaking does not result from acquisition, but it results in acquisition; (2) if input is both comprehensible and enough, necessary grammar is automatically provided. Krashen puts much value on comprehensible input (i.e., \( i+1 \)) before anything else. As many previous studies showed, it is clear that input plays a substantial role in SLA (for review, see R. Ellis, 2008).

Under the concept of the Input Hypothesis, content-based language teaching, the strong form of the communicative approach, has been conducted. This approach expects that learners can get 'two for one'; learning the subject
matter content and the target language at the same time (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). In Canada, such instruction has been introduced in French education since 1960s, and well known as French immersion education. Many of immersion students in Canada are enrolled in early immersion programs. These students have exposure to L2 (i.e., French) before starting school or from grade 1. When their schooling begins, teachers speak to them only in French; immersion students are taught entirely through L2. As their grade in school advances, students are taught in their L1, English. However, French immersion education seems not to be working out perfectly. The findings of immersion research suggest that learners in meaning-focused and experiential L2 classroom do not develop their interlanguage up to targetlike levels in some linguistic features, such as morphology and syntax, despite years of exposure of meaningful input (Harley & Swain, 1984). Swain, who studied immersion education in Canada for years, questioned whether comprehensible L2 input was sufficient to ensure overall interlanguage development. The immersion students improved L2 comprehension abilities, namely listening and reading abilities in French at the speaker’s level, but “their productive skills remain far from nativelike, particularly with respect to grammatical competence” (Swain, 1991, p.98). French immersion education makes it clear that an input-rich and communication-oriented classroom does not provide learners with all that is needed for their interlanguage development of targetlike proficiency (Swain, 1985). Swain attributed this issue to the fact that immersion classroom mostly involved listening and reading which forced learners to concentrate on semantic processing, resulting in little
opportunity for production of the language. In her view, complete grammatical processing ability needs not only sufficient input in L2, but also second language production. Learners' production of language (i.e., output) pushes them to process language more deeply, with more cognitive effort, than to process input. In productive activities, learners need to create linguistic form and meaning at the same time in order to achieve communicative goals. Output causes learners to shift focus of their attention from semantic comprehension processing to accurate grammatical processing. Thus, she claims that output encourages effective development of L2 syntax and morphology, the so-called Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 1995). Recently, from the observations of the content-based approach, the roles of output in L2 learning, as well as the need for formal instruction of grammar, have been considered.

**Focus on form**

The discussions above on the two language learning approaches seem to show that neither forms-focused instruction nor meaning-focused instruction alone can lead to complete SLA. In recent years, FonF instruction has gained prominence as the third approach that is likely to be appropriate for L2 learning. This approach is supposed to achieve a qualitative balance between grammar-based and communication-based teaching. In FonF, attention to forms and meaning is not mutually exclusive. Instead, the approach often contains an occasional attention to linguistic features triggered by problems with comprehension or production of learners and/or teachers during a meaning-
focused classroom lesson (Long & Robinson, 1998). In short, the fundamental orientation of FonF is meaning and communication, but simultaneously factors are involved that force learners to attend to the TL itself.

One of the syllabi for FonF is the task-based language teaching, which employs a nonlinguistic unit of analysis. In this method, learners are expected to learn the language through interaction with teachers or other learners. Learners are performers of tasks, not one-way receivers of input. For them, the learning goal is to accomplish the given tasks, and the language is incidentally learned by using it as a tool in achieving the goal. The tasks used in this instruction are called pedagogical tasks (Long, 1985), which are adjusted in accordance with learners' proficiency. Material designers and teachers design pedagogical tasks linking to target tasks which are concerned with learners' needs in a real world, such as attending a job interview, making reservations, and reading a restaurant menu or journals. Pedagogical tasks are designed so that learners can appropriately respond to everyday tasks.

Learners must make the fullest use of their knowledge of the TL in order to succeed in tasks. In doing so, they notice the incompleteness of their interlanguage system. The intended outcome of FonF is the so-called noticing. Schmidt (1993) uses the term noticing to refer to the process of 'registering the simple occurrence of some event', that is, that of directing attention to some language stimuli. By noticing, such stimuli are processed sufficiently and incorporated into learners' interlanguage system. Schmidt and Frota (1986) refer to the gap between the learners' interlanguage system and the TL system.
in their 'notice the gap' principle. In fact, some studies (Kowal & Swain, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 1995) show that learners notice the difference between what they want to say and what they are able to say. Swain (1998) claims that the activity of producing the TL (i.e. output) prompts learners to recognize consciously some of their linguistic problems and notice the gap in their interlanguage thorough cognitive processes of consolidating their existing knowledge or generating new linguistic knowledge. Moreover, she points out the metalinguistic function of output. This function means that learners' language reflects on awareness of something about their own or their interlocutor's language use. This is called metatalk. Learners working on tasks struggle to solve problems involving linguistic difficulties in metatalk. Swain's assumption from her work is that metatalk is a surfacing of language used in problem solving, or cognitive processes. Thus, encouraging metatalk among language learners leads them to effective SLA. Additionally, she insists that metatalk must occur in contexts where learners are engaged in "making meaning" because this condition may serve for learners to understand the critical links between forms, meaning, and function of the language (Swain, 1998).

3. Collaborative learning as FonF

The discussion in the section above denotes that productive activities help learners attend to their interlanguage and the target language through the act of noticing or metatalk. This observation implicates the potential usefulness of learners' collaborative work in that it gives them opportunities to use the TL in
meaningful contexts. For about three decades, research on language learning in small group and pair work has been conducted (see Pica, 1994 for a review). There are two major theories of collaborative language learning: the psycholinguistic perspective based on the work by Long (1983, 1996), and the sociocultural perspective based on the work by Vygotsky (1978). Both perspectives underscore the importance of interaction for L2 leaners.

The psycholinguistic perspective

Many studies on interaction stress the importance of input and how to make it comprehensible, based on Krashen’s (1982, 1985) Input Hypothesis and Long’s (1983, 1996) Interaction Hypothesis. In its early form, the Interaction Hypothesis (1983) claims that SLA can be facilitated when learners obtain comprehensible input through interaction, and such input is the result of negotiation for meaning when communication breakdowns occur. Long’s research (1983) demonstrates that learners make use of conversational tactics, such as confirmation check, comprehension check, and clarification request in order to solve ongoing communication difficulties. In the later form of the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), he extends his theory and emphasizes the importance of negative feedback and modified output. Negative feedback raises learners’ awareness to problems of their own output, and they respond to such feedback by modifying their output. This revised version of the hypothesis posits that SLA takes place through negative feedback when learners try to continue to communicate with interlocutors, and through modified output when
learners attempt to reformulate their utterances in order to make them comprehensible. In short, in the Interaction Hypothesis, what is significant for SLA is providing learners with the opportunity for negotiation for meaning.

Pica and colleagues carried out a study based on this theoretical perspective (Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987, reported in Mitchell & Myles, 2004). They investigated the relationship between interactional modifications and increased comprehension. Their study had two groups of L2 learners who were asked to listen to different versions of a script instructing them to place colored cutouts on a landscape picture. The first group listened to a linguistically modified version of the script with use of simplified grammar, but they were not allowed to ask any questions when they worked on the task. On the other hand, the second group listened to an originally recoded version of the script by native speakers, and they were encouraged to ask for clarifications from the person reading the script. Results showed that the learners who obtained modified input through negotiation for meaning achieved the task more successfully than those who received the simplified input. Thus, the results indicated that modification of input thorough interaction increases learners’ comprehension. From the viewpoint of the theory of interaction, small group work provides L2 learners with opportunities to give and receive feedback, and L2 learning is derived from interaction between learners and their interlocutors.

Although research on L2 input and interaction have contributed to deeper observations of both learners’ language acquisition and the interaction theory, the consideration from this line of research has been limited to quantitative
research paradigms, where linguistic interaction is viewed as a mere source of input or output. In other words, in research on negotiation for meaning, L2 learners are regarded as input- or output-producers rather than active agents of their own language (Watanabe, 2004). As criticized by Firth and Wagner (1997, cited in Watanabe, 2004), the interactionist approach focuses on only cognitive aspects and ignore social and contextual orientations to language. Language acquisition is not only a cognitive phenomenon, but also a social phenomenon. Swain (2000) asserts that investigation of input and output in isolation fails to uncover how knowledge is co-constructed through interaction. Furthermore, while putting importance on producing language, she concerns that the word 'output' evokes the image of language as a conveyer of meaning; she argues that language itself is an agent that makes meaning. She, therefore, defines the alternative term with the concept of 'advancedness' in language use as language, which "refers to the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (Swain, 2006, p.98). Storch (2002) also argues that research on negotiation from the interactionist viewpoint appears to assume that all interactions in pair or group work go on in a similar manner, and does not consider the effects of the nature of peer-peer assistance on learning outcomes.

As mentioned above, the theory and methodology of the interactionist approach to L2 learning was criticized, and accordingly the need for an alternative theoretical framework has come to light, namely Sociocultural Theory (SCT). By adopting the sociocultural framework, SLA research is able to extend beyond
the notion of input and output, and gain another insight into language learning through interaction.

The sociocultural perspective

The main concept of sociocultural theory, based largely on the work of Vygotsky (1978), is that higher cognitive functions, such as attention and memory, first appear on the social or interpsychological plane, and later they are internalized on the cognitive or intrapsychological plane. This internalization of social interactive processes is mediated by the most significant semiotic tool, language. That is, from the sociocultural theoretical perspective, human cognitive development involving language learning is constructed through social interaction with others in the social environment.

In its original conception of SCT, it is assumed that interaction is between experts (e.g., parents, teachers) and novices (e.g., young children). According to Vygotsky, learning or development is the internalization of social interaction, and the process of internalization takes place within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD implies the gap between people’s present and their potential ability, and focuses on the extent to which novices are able to achieve something with support from experts. In the ZPD, the assistance from experts carefully attuned to the novice’s need. Wood et al. (1976) refer to this support as scaffolding, which contains control of experts to allow novices to manage with their competence. The help from experts to novices becomes more implicit as novices’ development progresses. The insight from SCT indicates
that scaffolding is internalized (i.e., results in novices' development) when it is attuned within their ZPD, and the new development creates higher level of the ZPD. In other words, gradual development is caused by continuous scaffolding and attendant internalization.

Although Vygotsky's theory is fundamentally concerned with child development, SCT can be an appropriate framework for SLA because L2 knowledge is considered to be constructed through social interaction between learners and teachers or learners. Different learners have different strengths and weaknesses. According to Ohta (2001), when learners encounter linguistic problems and cannot handle them individually, they share their different language resources and solve these problems in collaboration with each other. By working together, they can achieve a high level of performance beyond their individual level of competence. Therefore, from the viewpoint of SLA, the ideas of the ZPD and scaffolding are not limited to the expert-novice relationship like teacher-learner interaction, and are applicable to interaction with peers. A number of studies (e.g., Anton & DiCamilla, 1999; Donato, 1994; Storch, 2002; Swain & Lapkin, 1998) have investigated peer interaction when learners work in small groups or pairs, and demonstrated that the notion of ZPD is applicable to learning of not only less knowledgeable or less proficient participants but also all participants in interaction (Wells, 1999). The potential learning within peers is usually regarded as collective scaffolding, which is the concept proposed by Donato (1994). Donato examined collaborative work of a group of three learners engaging in problem solving task, and revealed that learners were "at the same
time individually novices and collectively experts" (p.46). Learners provide scaffolding mutually in interaction with each other, sharing their linguistic knowledge in order to reach solutions to language-related problems that they encounter.

Studies on peer interaction, however, have also shown that not all pair and group work trigger L2 learning. Only when learners work together to achieve one common goal, that is, when collaboration is necessary, peer interaction provides opportunities for L2 learning. Swain (2000) proposes the notion of collaborative dialogue, "in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building" (p.102), applying Vygotskian theory to her output hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 1995). In collaborative dialogue, a cognitive and social activity mediated as the language, learners formulate and test hypothesis on their own language use, and assess and correct themselves or other learners. This function of language as a cognitive tool is coined languaging (Swain, 2006). She believes that SLA research can gain another insight into L2 learning beyond the analysis of input and output by examining collaborative dialogue and languaging as mediational tool for language learning.

Recent research on collaborative learning from the sociocultural perspective has been designed to draw learners' attention to linguistic forms without isolating forms from meaningful contexts or communicative activities. Much research has analyzed learner-learner interaction focusing on language-related episodes (LREs). LREs are defined as "any part of a dialogue where the students talk about the language they are producing, question their language
use, or correct themselves or others” (Swain & Lapkin, 1998, p.326). LREs receive considerable attention in the line of focus on form research in that learners' awareness to linguistic form “may also serve the function of helping students to understand the relationship between meaning, forms, and function in a highly context-sensitive situation” (Swain, 1998, p.69). Numerous studies on collaborative learning employing the analysis of LREs have found that LREs positively affect L2 development (e.g., Kim, 2008; Storch, 2002; Swain & Lapkin, 1998, 2002; Watanabe & Swain, 2007). These studies confirm that learners reach correct solutions to their linguistic problems and co-construct new linguistic knowledge by producing LREs during collaborative tasks. Overall, researchers supporting the SCT lay stress on the assumption that collaboration facilitates L2 learning through LREs. Furthermore, these researchers incorporate other variables that seem to affect L2 learning into SLA research. Their attention is paid, for instance, to the influence of task type (e.g., de la Colina & García Mayo, 2007; Nassaji & Tian, 2010; Swain & Lapkin, 2001) and learners' L2 proficiency level (e.g., Kim & McDonough, 2008; Leeser, 2004; Watanabe & Swain, 2007, 2008).

Based on these strong arguments that collaborative learning has a positive impact on L2 learning, some studies compare collaborative and individual work, that is, learners performing the same tasks in pairs or alone. Most of these comparative studies have shown some advantages for pair work. In an early study, Storch (1999) analyzed the impact of collaborative work in L2 writing on grammar accuracy across three different tasks: cloze exercise, text construction
and composition. The study found that the students who worked in pairs produced shorter and syntactically less complex written texts, but their texts were overall more accurate than those of the students who wrote individually. Her later study (Storch, 2005) compared pair and individual performance on a short composition task. In this study, 23 adult learners of ESL (English as an L2) were given a choice to write in pairs or alone, and eighteen of them chose to work in pair and five individually. The study obtained the result that those who worked in pairs produced better texts in terms of grammatical accuracy and syntactic complexity. Storch stated that collaboration afforded learners the opportunity to share their knowledge and provide each other with immediate feedback. In a similar but larger scale study, Storch and Wigglesworth (2007) compared the performance of 24 pairs and 24 individual learners on two same writing tasks, a report and an argumentative essay. The results showed that there were no differences in fluency and complexity, but that the written texts produced by pairs were significantly more accurate than those written individually. The authors concluded that because learners in pair work can pay more attention to the language than those working individually, the notion of collaboration explains why pairs achieve a higher level of performance, that is, they produce linguistically more accurate texts.

4. The weaknesses of previous studies on collaborative learning and directions for further research

As discussed above, studies comparing collaborative and individual work
(Storch, 1999, 2005; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007) have offered evidence that collaborative learning has positive impact on task performance. However, these studies did not demonstrate the clear relationship between collaboration and L2 learning, because they only focused on the process and nature of collaborative learning that appear to affect subsequent language learning. In other words, the previous studies did not measure specifically what learners learned; what learning occurred through collaborative work.

There is a little research tried to investigate this issue. The Kim’s (2008) study, with learners of Korean as an L2 (KSL), compared the impact of collaborative and individual tasks on the relationship between LREs and the acquisition of L2 vocabulary. Thirty-two KSL learners carried out a pretest, a dictogloss task and two posttests over a period of 3 weeks. Half of the learners completed the dictogloss in pairs and other half individually while thinking aloud. The results indicated that although learners working in pairs produced approximately the same number of LREs as those who worked individually, they had significantly better performance on both immediate and delayed vocabulary tests. Kuiken and Vedder (2002), however, reported contradicting results to Kim’s (2008). In their study, individual and small-group work during a dictogloss task were compared in order to examine the acquisition of the passive form in the ESL context. The results showed that the opportunities for interaction neither resulted in better scores on the immediate and the delayed post-test, nor led to more frequent use of the passive form in the reconstructed texts. That is, no positive relationship was found between collaboration and L2 learning. More
recently, Nassaji and Tian (2010) examined the effectiveness of two types of tasks (reconstruction cloze task and reconstruction editing tasks) for learning English phrasal verbs in the ESL classroom. They focused on whether collaborative work led to greater gains of knowledge of the target verbs than individual work. They found that carrying out the tasks in pairs led to more accurate task completion than doing individually, but there was no significantly clear evidence that collaborative work caused greater knowledge gain. Thus, the findings of Kuiken and Vedder (2002) and Nasaji and Tian (2010) do not support the presumed advantage of collaborative learning over individual learning or the idea that collaboration is necessarily more effective to L2 learning than individual work.

Previous studies on collaborative learning showed mixed results for the effectiveness of pair and group work. In addition, most of them demonstrated neither what sort of learning occurred nor what learners acquired in the concrete. In other words, the findings from previous studies have yet led to complete understandings of the relationship between collaborative learning and L2 learning; the findings are still ambiguous in relation to L2 learning, which may lead one to wonder whether collaborative learning really facilitates SLA.

In order to resolve the unclarified issues on collaborative learning, future studies are needed. There are at least six directions for further research. First of all, future research must be conducted over a long period. Many previous studies recognized, as one of the limitations, their short-run data collections that provided learners with only one opportunity to engage in collaborative learning.
The effect of collaborative tasks does not necessarily appear during or immediately after the tasks. If learners can get some linguistic knowledge through collaborative learning, it may take time to consolidate the knowledge in their brain (i.e., restructuring) and finally internalize it (McLaughlin, 1999). Thus, more longitudinal studies should be conducted.

Secondly, future research needs to pay attention to learners' language development after collaborative tasks because previous studies did not show adequate understandings of this matter. In order to demonstrate the superiority of collaboration over individual work, SLA researchers must clarify the positive relationship between collaborative learning and SLA in future studies. By focusing on the outcome of learners' individual work after collaborative learning, we could potentially explain internalization of linguistic knowledge (i.e., language acquisition). Therefore, there is a real need for product-oriented studies that can indicate the effectiveness of collaborative learning on linguistic achievement of individual learners.

Thirdly, future research must explain the relationship between collaborative learning and learning items. Nassaji and Tian (2010) reported that collaboration led to better task performance, but it might not necessarily lead to subsequent learning of the targeted forms. They associated the reason with the type of target forms and the learners' previous knowledge of these forms. In their study, the target form was English phrasal verbs, and they were mostly new to the learners. The authors, therefore, concluded that it might be difficult for the learners to provide each other with enough scaffolding and feedback during the tasks. This
finding appears to suggest that it is worthy to explore the effects of collaborative learning on targeted particular linguistic items. Moreover, Nassaji and Tian referred to a significant effect of task types on target forms (i.e., phrasal verbs). The result of their study showed that the editing task was more effective in prompting form-focused interaction than the cloze task. However, the study by Swain and Lapkin (2001), which compared the effectiveness of a dictogloss task with a jigsaw task, showed that there was no significant difference between the two types of tasks, in terms of the overall degree of the learners' attention to the target form (French pronominal verbs) in their LREs. The relationship between the type of collaborative tasks and targeted linguistic items is still unclear. More research, therefore, is needed to investigate whether and how task types affect specific learning items, such as vocabulary and particular linguistic forms.

Fourthly, from the pedagogical perspective, SLA research on collaborative learning needs to investigate how the learners come to understand the items which remain unsolved during collaborative activities. Some studies showed that all learners can benefit from pair and group work, and linguistic problems that learners encounter in collaborative work are sometimes left unresolved or incorrectly resolved. The possible reason for unsuccessful collaborative learning is that learners might not be ready to discuss some linguistic problems, nor they solve these problems correctly, due to the lack of their linguistic knowledge or ability (e.g., de la Colina & García Mayo, 2007; Leeser, 2004). McDonough (2004) reports that EFL learners in Thai express concern about learning wrong grammar from their peers, especially when they engage in grammar-focused
tasks. Thus, if they have incorrectly resolved or unresolved linguistic problems, they need another way of solving these problems. With some additional support, learners might be able to reach correct solutions. For example, additional follow-up activities or review session after collaborative tasks might be useful so that learners can receive correct input and test their interlanguage knowledge (Kim, 2008). Such post-task activities could be pedagogical follow-up activities to implement collaborative learning in language classrooms. Moreover, such post-task activities may lead learners to reflect on their performance, and improve their interlanguage knowledge by consulting completed or correct versions. Swain and Lapkin (2007) mention that post-task activity may enhance learners' attention to targeted forms. It is worth of investigating how post-task activities and external scaffolding affects learners' language development.

Fifthly, SLA research has to consider the level of learners' L2 proficiency because it is one of the influential factors that have a bearing on collaborative learning. Some researchers attribute the unsuccessful collaboration to proficiency of learners who participate in collaborative work. Long (1996) states that interaction seems to take place especially when learners with different levels of L2 proficiency question each other's linguistic proposals. For less proficient learners, the linguistic information gap is seen to be beneficial because they can receive correct feedback from more proficient learners (Leeser, 2004). Many studies have investigated the complicating factor, L2 proficiency. Some studies suggest that the proficiency difference between learners working together decreases the degree of collaboration (Kowal & Swain, 1994). Other
studies, however, show that learners' proficiency does not necessarily affect the nature of peer assistance. Regardless of proficiency difference between learners, collaboration-oriented interaction seems to have a greater impact on the outcome of problem-solving activities (Storch. 2001; Swain & Watanabe, 2007; Watanabe, 2004). Earlier studies have shown mixed results about the effect of learners' proficiency on collaborative learning. There is a need for research on the relationship between learners' proficiency differences and outcomes of collaborative learning.

Finally, most previous research on collaborative learning has been conducted in the L2 context, not the foreign language (FL) contexts. Ortega (2009) mentions that "knowledge about L2 writing will eventually be built on a broader base that includes insights from a wide range of school, university, workplace and virtual settings in varied FL contexts" (p.233). Research on L2 learning must, therefore, be extended to from L2 to FL contexts to present evidence of the usefulness of collaborative learning as a pedagogically applicable tool to various language classrooms. Future studies should not only examine collaborative work itself, but also explore what factors and conditions have beneficial effects for L2 learning.

5. Conclusion

In the field of SLA, a recent view on language learning approaches is that FonF is likely to be appropriate and effective in L2 learning because this approach, unlike FonFs or FonM, are expected to elicit learners' awareness of
the form-function relationship which is thought to be essential for SLA. As Swain (1995, 2006) argued, such awareness is raised by producing language, namely output or languaging, when learners are engaged in making meaning. In terms of theoretical perspectives, both psycholinguistic and sociocultural frameworks emphasize the importance of interaction with others in cognitive processing. In the psycholinguistic view, L2 input becomes comprehensible and SLA is facilitated through interaction. The focus of studies on interaction is how L2 input is negotiated by learners and made comprehensible through the use of conversational strategies, such as clarification request, comprehension check, and confirmation check. On the other hand, the sociocultural theory regards learners' production of language as a cognitive activity in the social context. Thus, the studies from this theoretical perspective aim at uncovering how learners mediate such an activity with a cognitive tool (i.e., language) in collaborative talk with their interlocutors. The two major theoretical frameworks support the implication that interaction and collaboration between learners lead to SLA.

Given this background, in recent years, research on collaborative learning has received a lot of attention as an effective communicative approach to SLA. A number of studies on collaborative learning have indicated that pair and small group work can provide language learners with opportunities to engage in cognitive activities, such as linguistic problem solving in meaningful and purposeful communicative contexts. These previous studies, however, have only focused on the process of collaborative learning and subsequent L2
learning. A major limitation of them, therefore, is that they show the findings of neither what specifically learners learned, nor whether they developed their linguistic knowledge or ability through interaction with other learners. This issue needs to be addressed in future research.

Furthermore, the findings of earlier research have pedagogical implications for the use of collaborative activities (i.e., pair or small-group work) in L2 classrooms. They suggest that learners can solve language-related problems more effectively and correctly through peer assistance than when they work individually. As I discussed above, however, there are many issues that SLA research should make clear about collaborative learning. From a pedagogical perspective, evidence of the effectiveness of collaborative work from previous studies was neither clear nor enough. Future research, therefore, must explore variables for effective collaborative learning, such as learning conditions and task types, so that more fine-tuned, empirical-based evidence can be provided. More research must be conducted in order to employ learners’ collaboration as an effective pedagogical tool in language classrooms.

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