

Modified Output in Task-based EFL Classes across Gender

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Abstract

The current study examined the modification devices (MDs) used by male and female non-native speakers (NNSs) learning EFL during dyadic task-based interactions. Three meaning-oriented tasks, namely picture-description, spot-the-difference, and opinion-exchange, were used to elicit data from 24 (12 male and 12 female, forming 4 male-male, 4 female-female, and 4 male-female dyads) Iranian (Azeri-speaking) EFL learners with intermediate language proficiency in English as L3. All interactions were video-taped and transcribed. For the sake of systematicity, only the first 150 sentences of transcribed data were analyzed to assess the effect of interlocutor's gender on the usage of different types of modification devices using Mackey et al.'s (2003) model. The findings revealed that 'confirmation check' was the device mostly used by both genders. The results also demonstrated that 'clarification check' was the most frequently used strategy for negotiation among the students regardless of their gender. Analyses of the data propose that these modification devices facilitate comprehension of input and output and enhance the negotiation for both meaning and form. Further results and implications are discussed in the paper.

Keywords: dyadic interactions, gender, Iranian EFL learners, modification devices, modified output, task-based language teaching

1. Introduction

The history of second language acquisition (SLA) has been characterized by an unending search for more efficient ways of teaching and learning second

or foreign languages. For decades, explorations carried out by linguists and applied linguists in this regard have often centered on issues such as the role of grammar in language teaching, as well as the development of accuracy and fluency in language teaching. Deficiencies of the teaching methods and syllabi have given rise to shifts in SLA research and practice which is characterized by a movement from Methods to Post-Methods era (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Over the past decades, this quest was mainly influenced by the theories proposed for describing the nature of learning and the factors involved in the process of learning. According to Gass (1999), language learning is stimulated by the communicative pressure that one of its important requirements is 'input'. The precursors of such studies on input are those which define it as auditory or visual linguistic environment that the learner is exposed to (Carroll, 1999; Lightbown, 1985; Watanabe, 1997) or in other words, the available target language (Ellis, 2006). Different theories have been suggested regarding the importance of input, such as the theory which considered input as the only factor leading to learning (Krashen, 1982). Other views have focused on the interaction between learners and the input (as an external socio-cultural factor) as a requisite for language learning (Carroll, 1999; Lee, 2002; Long, 1996).

Input is the prerequisite of interaction and one of its important features is the role it plays in fostering meaningful communicative use in appropriate contexts. According to Krashen's input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), a person can learn language when he is exposed to linguistic input that is comprehensible to him. A message will be intelligible when it is slightly above the level of immediate comprehension of the learner, that is when it has the status of *I (interlanguage) +1*. Based on this hypothesis, the most important assumption is that speaking should not be taught in classroom at early stages of language learning (Krashen, 1985).

Despite its significant influence on second language studies, this hypothesis has been widely criticized for its lack of supportive evidence by those believing that a learner's exposure to the target language is not in itself a sufficient condition for second language acquisition (Gass, 1988; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Long, 1988; Swain, 1985; White, 1987). The opponents of this hypothesis believed that it ignored the actual values of mental processes which are helpful for gleaning linguistic information that is present inside the input and the values are obtained by different mental processes such as feedback and interaction (Brown, 2001).

The Interaction Hypothesis of Long (1996), which evolved out of criticism of Krashen's input hypothesis, is one of the models characterizing the nature of second language learning through interaction (Basturkmen,

2006). It has long been argued that it is highly unlikely if not possible for the learners to acquire second language communicative competence without engaging in meaningful interaction (Adams, 2003). The hypothesis emphasizes the role of input as a factor providing samples of positive evidence (by means of requests for clarification or confirmation checks) of how the language system works since the interactants' involvement in interaction provides the interactionally modified input for them. Thus, they can comprehend the input and focus their attention on new or partially learned vocabulary items and language structures which in turn enables their acquisition.

However, Long (1996) also recognized that "meaning negotiation can induce learners to modify their own output and this, too, may promote acquisition" (Ellis & He, 1999, p. 286); therefore, any negative feedback, explicit or implicit, including *recasts*, can provide learners with necessary information they need to notice the gap between their own output and the native-like language forms.

Long's work directed the focus toward Swain's seminal work (1985) in which she emphasizes the importance of dialogues as joint or inter-personal activities which enable learners to verbalize their target language knowledge. Swain conducted several studies in immersion contexts in Canada, and based on these studies, she claimed that providing immersion students merely with great amount of comprehensible input did not help them abandon their off-target performance and that they were clearly identified as non-native speakers or writers (Swain, 1985). Especially, she perceived that "the expressive performance of these students was far weaker than that of same aged native speakers" (cited in Shehadeh, 2003, p.156). Therefore, Swain proposed a new hypothesis, in relation to the second language learners' production, comparable to Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis and termed it 'Comprehensible Output Hypothesis' (Swain, 1985). Swain argued that "comprehensible output (CO) is the output that extends the linguistic repertoire of the learner as he or she attempts to create precisely and appropriately the desired meaning" (Swain, 1985, p. 252). She further argued that the role of learner production of CO is independent of the role of input.

Later on, Swain (1995) refined her CO hypothesis and extended her arguments. According to Swain (1995), as the comprehension of a message can take place with little syntactic analysis of the input, production forces learners to process language more deeply and pay more attention to morphosyntax; which implies that the active engagement of the learners in learning process must not be ignored.

Swain (1995) stated that, the act of producing output in a target language (TL) will lead to second language development because of three factors: noticing, hypothesis testing and internalizing metalinguistic information (as cited in Adams, 2003).

In this vein, several studies examined the noticing function of output in target language learning (Iwashita, 1999; Izumi, 2000, 2002; Shehadeh, 1999, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Through these studies, it is demonstrated that producing the target language is a mechanism that enables learners to notice a gap in their existing language performance which they may pay attention to by external feedback or internal feedback. More noticing has been argued to lead to more learning (see Adams, 2003; Basturkmen, 2006). But when interlocutors ignore a source of problem (Shehadeh, 2001), the breakdown in comprehension or communication cannot be detected and as a result, the learner who has made a mistake cannot notice the gap between his output and the TL criterion. In other words, negative feedback on unclear ideas pushes the learner to reformulate the incomprehensible messages by trying out new structures. Thus, "pushed output may assist the learner in acquiring L2" (Lee, 2002, p. 276).

In 1989, Pica and her colleagues investigated the learners' processes of modification of ungrammatical output in response to the feedback from NSs. The main purpose of their study was to investigate the amount of modified output in response to types of interactional moves such as clarification requests and confirmation checks. They found that the effect of modification moves on modified output was greater and more significant than the effect of task types. In a similar vein, Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993), who carried out a small scale study with 3 learners, found that two of their participants showed permanent accuracy improvement when pushed by the clarification requests.

Mackey (1999) compared the effects of three learning conditions on development of question forms. She found that only when learners participated in interaction and modified their responses during the interactive exchanges did they benefit the most.

Oliver and Mackey examined the amount of production of modified output of teacher-student interactions in four contexts of language exchange based on content, communication, management and explicit language (2003). The study showed that teachers provided the most amount of feedback when their exchanges with learners focused on explicit language and content, and also students produced highest amount of modified output in explicit language context. This study suggested that the focus of exchange can influence the amount of produced modified output.

Another similar study by Mackey, Oliver, and Leeman (2003) that is related to the current study investigated the difference between frequency of feedback, provision of opportunities for modified output, and rate of produced modified output considering the offered opportunities based on the interlocutor types: child versus adult, and native versus nonnative interlocutor. Their study proved that participants in adult NS-NNS dyads provided the most feedback (47%) and adult NNS-NNS dyads provided the least amount of feedback (32%). However, it became clear that adult NNS-NNS dyads offered the greatest amount of opportunities (98%) while child NNS-NNS dyads offered least opportunities (86%), and for modified output, child NNS-NNS dyads took the biggest share (41%). As this study suggested, learners may encounter different linguistic environments depending on interlocutor type. Knowing this point is beneficial to learners and teachers as well as to researchers, a point which this study hoped to clarify further.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to reveal commonly used modification strategies used by students, the knowledge of which will assist teachers in better dealing with language problems of their students. Students themselves may also benefit from recognizing the types of modification devices (MD) such as comprehension check, self correction and topic shift that they use while interacting with their interlocutors so that they can adjust their use of MD with the needs of community in which they are interacting.

Various studies have investigated the use of interactional moves in interactions of learners to find out whether learners are able to provide some linguistic feedback to other learners and most of them have found that the use of MDs have different advantages such as increasing syntactization, improving grammatical accuracy and pronunciation in the interactions of adult non-natives (Iwashita, 2001, 1999; Lee, 2002; Shehadeh, 1999), of child non-natives (Mackey & Oliver, 2002) and of non-natives with natives (Iwashita, 2003). However, few have touched on the relationship between the gender of partners in a dyad or pair and types of MD (or feedback moves).

In 1986, Gass and Varonis investigated the male-female differences in talk and focused on negotiation styles in three groups of non-native speakers: male-male, female-male, and female-female. The participants took part in one free conversation task and two picture description tasks. They summarized their findings as “Men took greater advantage of the opportunities to use the conversation in a way that allow them to produce a greater amount of comprehensible output, whereas women utilize the conversation to obtain a greater amount of comprehensible input” (p. 349).

In a similar study, Shehadeh (1994) compared the performances of 35 adult participants across mixed-gender versus matched-gender dyads and groups. Using three communicative tasks to collect the data, Shehadeh found that for females, same gender dyadic interaction provided better context to produce more comprehensible output and to self-initiate repairs, whereas for males, mixed-gender interactions were more suitable.

In a recent study, Rassaei and Tavakoli (2011) investigated the effect of gender on the effectiveness of the corrective feedback as they compared 15 male and 15 female Iranian learners. They compared learners' performance in matched- and mixed-gender dyads on post-tests and found a statistically significant difference between learners' performance in matched- and mixed-gender dyads. They also predicted that the provided corrective feedback in matched-gender dyads was more beneficial than the feedback provided in mixed gender dyads. Their analysis which was undertaken based on the students' scores on posttests confirmed their hypothesis.

The present study was accordingly aimed at determining any significant differences between male and female EFL learners' use of MD during dyadic task-based interactions.

Is there any significant difference between male and female EFL learners in their use of modification devices during dyadic task-based interactions?

2. Methods

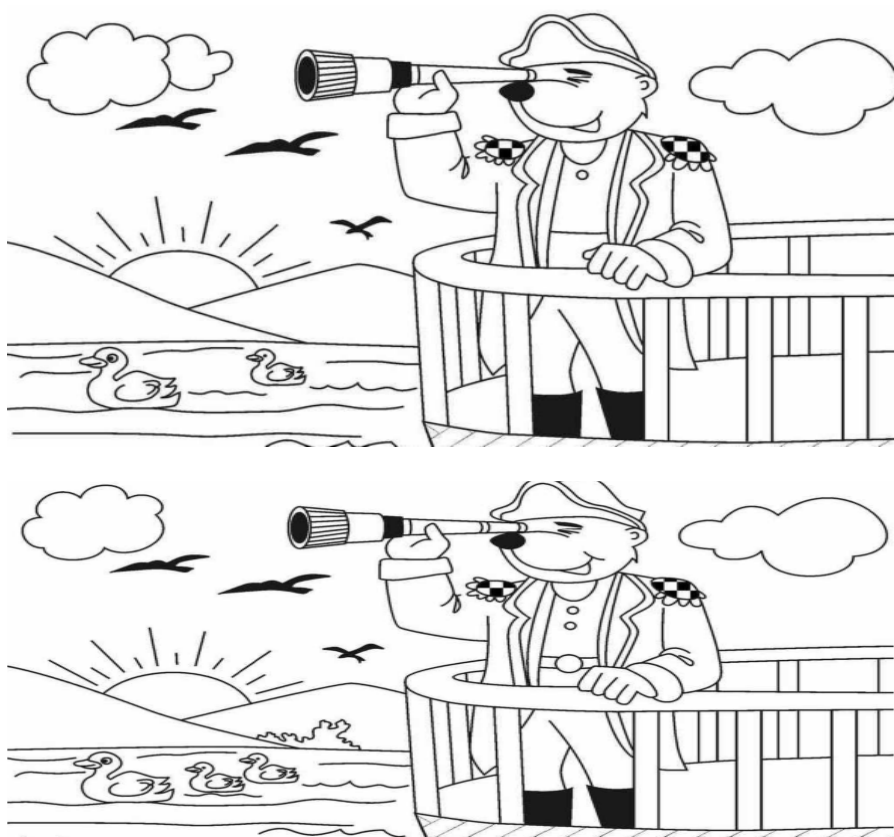
2.1 Participants

The participants of the present study were 24 Iranian (non-native) EFL learners, 12 male and 12 female students, whose ages ranged between 19 and 25 years. They shared the same linguistic and cultural background, that is, they all spoke Azeri Turkish as their first language and were fluent in Persian (the official language of Iran). These participants were chosen from among the intermediate students enrolling at the Language Center of Urmia University (the decision on intermediate language proficiency was based on the Center's in-house placement tests, which included spoken sections and the learners' achievement scores). The students were motivated to take part in this study as they remarked. The logic behind the decision to select students with intermediate level of proficiency was that such students have acceptable command of English to perform the tasks required for the completion of the study and are able to understand and use language to meet survival needs and routine social demands (Lee, 2002); furthermore, such students are likely to provide more feedback opportunities than the advanced learners.

2.2 Instruments

To collect data, the researchers used three communicative tasks adapted from similar studies on L2 development (Iwashita, 2001; Mackey & Oliver, 2002; Shehadeh, 2001). These tasks were used in a counterbalanced order for 12 dyads participating in the study. The selected tasks included (a) spot-the-difference (closed two-way), (b) picture-description (one-way) and (c) opinion-exchange (open two-way) tasks. Spot-the-difference task required the interactants to find the differences in two variations of one picture while none of the participants was able to look at the other participants' picture. The following pictures (Figure 1) serve as an example of spot-the-difference task:

Figure 1. Spot-the-difference task sample



To carry out the picture-description task, one of the interlocutors had to draw a picture based on the descriptions of his partner whereas the picture

was not shown to the person drawing it. An example of the picture used for this task appears below in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Picture-description task sample



Finally, in the opinion-exchange task, both of the participants were given a text entitled '*Only a mad man would choose to live in a large modern city*' (Adopted from the book "For and Against" by L.G. Alexander (1968), p. 52) to read and give their opinions regarding the material they read. These types of tasks were used because they are considered to provide opportunities for interactional adjustments, such as clarifications of meanings, to occur.

In order to provide for detailed transcriptions of the meaning-oriented verbal interactions of the interlocutors, a Sony Model handycam was employed to film the students' performances during the given tasks. Students were seated inside an empty classroom that was used as the meeting room and the video-recorder was placed out of students' views to avoid causing any stress or negative feelings.

2.3 Data collection procedure

Prior to the experiment, the students were given essential instructions about the tasks and the purposes of each task. They were informed that they were not allowed to ask the researchers the meaning of any word or grammatical structure of any sentence and that it was quite essential to communicate the incomprehensible messages with their interlocutor. Having armed students with the three tasks presented in a counterbalanced order, the interactions were observed and no interventions were made by the researchers. It is

worth mentioning that no effort was made by the researchers to manipulate the frequency or characteristics of modified output. The interactants were not aware that the researcher in charge intended to examine the provision, amount, nature of modified output and the types of interactional moves or modification devices in their performance.

2.4 Context of the study

Urmia University's Language Center started its work twelve years ago as a medium for fostering language abilities of university students who need to learn English for mainly academic purposes. To this end, the Language Center established communicatively-oriented classes of not more than 15 students (to give them more opportunities to practice the language). The books and other audio-visual materials used in this institute are provided by Brock University, Canada, and help students develop familiarity with the lexis and idioms of the major human topics. The books foster the four basic skills of language and the academically designed syllabus enables the students to progress in a rather short time in the meaning-focused class environment.

One further reason why this institute was selected as the context of the present study was that investigating the occurrence of modified output across gender needed a co-educated institute and this institute was the only co-educated language center in Urmia.

2.5 Data transcription

In order to maintain systematicity, transcriptions were only made of the first 150 utterances in each task. Furthermore, the first 150 utterances were selected as the standard basis of transcriptions as each dyad produced at least 150 utterances for each task. To distinguish utterance from other streams of language, the definition of Crookes and Rulon (1985) was used: "a stream of speech having at least one of the following characteristics: (a) under one intonation contour, (b) bounded by pauses, and (c) constituting a single semantic unit" (Mackey, Oliver & Leeman, 2003). The first 150 utterances were selected as the standard basis of transcriptions as each dyad produced at least 150 utterances for each task. The transcribed corpus of the present study consisted of 5400 utterances since each of the 12 dyads completed 3 tasks. Moreover, the transcribed utterances were double-checked by another trained assistant to maintain inter-rater reliability (Kappa Coefficient $K = .85$) regarding the consistency of (a) segmentation of utterances, and (b) utterance content.

2.6 Data coding

Having transcribed the needed data, initial utterances were codified in different categories. The first step of categorization entailed identifying the *target-like* versus *non-target-like* utterances, which was carried out by two assistants who held an MA in TEFL. Only non-target-like utterances were included in the analysis of this study as exploring the provision and nature of negative feedback was the goal of the present study.

Then, according to the model used by Mackey et al. (2003) the responses to non-target-like utterances were classified as *feedback* and *no feedback* moves based on whether they provided negative feedback or not. Confirmation checks, clarification checks, requests for help, and recasts were all considered as negative feedback moves as they all alarm and warn the interlocutor about the incomprehensibility of their messages. While provision of negative feedback helps the interlocutors to modify their message production toward comprehensibility, it is not always the case that the conversation partners provide negative feedback; however, it can be observed that sometimes the interactants prefer to continue the conversation without trying to inform about the non-target-like nature of the original utterance. In the present study, such ignorance was classified as *no feedback*. The following examples, taken from the current study, show *no feedback* and *feedback moves*, respectively:

Extract 1. (Male-Female dyad, grammatically non-target-like utterance followed by no feedback)

Male: There is no leaves?

Female: No

Extract 2. (Female-Female dyad, grammatically and lexically non-target-like utterance followed by *negative feedback*)

Female 1: There are floors on the jar.

Female 2: Flowers in the jar.

The example provided below (Extract 3) shows the total process starting from a non-target-like utterance and ending in modified output:

Extract 3. (Male-Male dyad, modified output)

Male 2: There is three candies on the cake and two of them are burning?

Male 1: What?

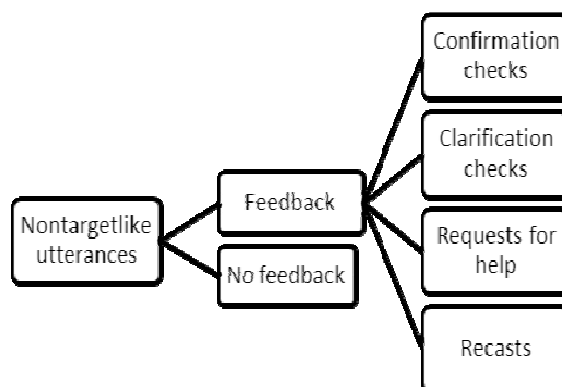
Male 2: Candies, we put them on cakes and light them.

Male 1: Oh, three candles are on the cake.

Male 2: Yes, candles.

In summary, data was categorized as is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Data categorization framework adopted from Mackey et al. (2003).



3. Results

The notion of modified output is defined as the output of the speaker which is modified by some notification made by the hearer originated from the incomprehensibility of the uttered message. This incomprehensibility may be because of grammatical errors, pronunciation mistakes or errors in semantic incomprehensibility of that message. Whatever the reason for the difficulty in understanding might be, interlocutors sometimes inform their partners by giving negative feedback so that the producer of the incomprehensible message may have the chance to correct or modify his utterance toward comprehensibility by noticing.

3.1 Negative feedback

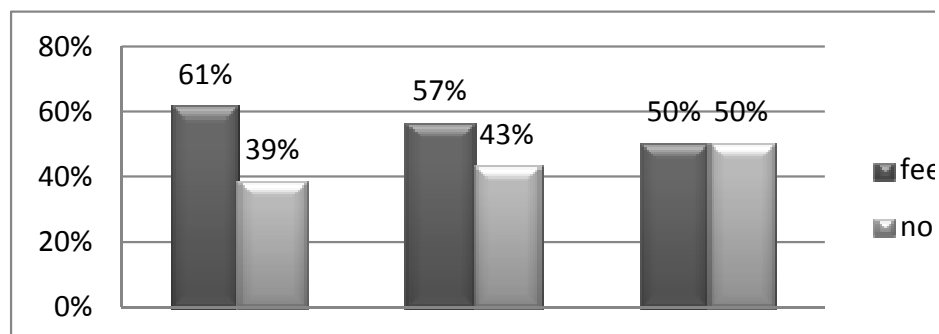
As stated earlier, the research question was concerned with whether there was any significant difference between male and female EFL learners in their use of specific MDs. First, the number of times interlocutors replied to learner non-target-like utterances with negative feedback was tallied and then tabulated. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics in terms of feedback regarding the three interactional structures.

Table 1. Feedback and No Feedback moves for Male and Female Students in Different Gender-Based Dyads: Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges

Interactional structure	Male-Female			Female-Female			Male-Male		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>(Range)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>(Range)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>(Range)</i>
Feedback	5.83	1.992	(3-12)	8.42	3.753	(3-14)	8.58	5.728	(1-18)
No feedback	3.67	2.674	(0-9)	6.42	4.481	(1-16)	8.75	6.181	(2-19)

Of the total number of non-target-like utterances (N=502) identified, 276 (55%) received feedback while the remaining 226 (45 %) utterances did not receive any feedback. Figure 2 illustrates that generally there is a slight variation between feedback provision and lack of providing feedback. The following bar graph depicts the distribution of feedback in 3 pairings of male and female students (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Distribution of feedback



As Figure 4 indicates, the intra-pairing comparisons reveals that the most amount of feedback provision belongs to the male-female dyads (61%) whereas the least number of feedbacks (50%) was provided in male-male dyads, and the students in female-female dyads provided 57% feedback.

3.2 Modification devices

MDs or interactional moves play a major part in the interaction process as they are used by the interactants to signal the misunderstandings and incomprehensibility in the messages or utterances produced, and provide the producer of the incomprehensible message a chance to know that there is something wrong with his or her message. In other words, MDs serve two purposes: (1) for the hearer to signal the speaker about the non-target-like nature of the message, and (2) for the producer to notice the gap between his utterance and the target language. Four types of MDs were identified in this study and categories, definitions and examples for them are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Categories, definitions and examples for modification devices
(taken from L. Lee, 2002)

Types of MDs	Definition	Example
Confirmation Check	To repeat parts of the statement to ensure understanding	“on the cake?”
Clarification check	To express confusion or ask for help due to unfamiliar words or incomprehensible message	“which one?” “what?”
Request for help	To request information for unknown lexical items	“a place for putting things in it in the kitchen,
Recast	or expressions Repeating all or part of an incorrect utterance	what do they call it?” “- why does they carry water?” - right, why do they carry water?”

Hence, in the present study the research question intended to investigate the existence of any significant difference among the three pairings' use of MDs during dyadic task-based interactions. In so doing, the number of times that pairs used four types of MDs was counted and tallied (Table 3).

Table 3. Interactional moves used by Male-Female, Female-Female, and Male-Male dyads

Interactional Structure	Male-Female	Female-Female	Male-Male	Total
Interactional moves				
Confirmation check	49	48	59	156
Clarification check	10	28	28	66
Request for help	6	18	10	34
Recast	5	7	8	20
Total	70	101	105	276

Based on Table 3 and the following chart (Figure 5), with an intra-group comparison it can be easily observed that the main type of modification device that was used by all the pairs is confirmation check.

Figure 5. Distribution of MDs across dyads

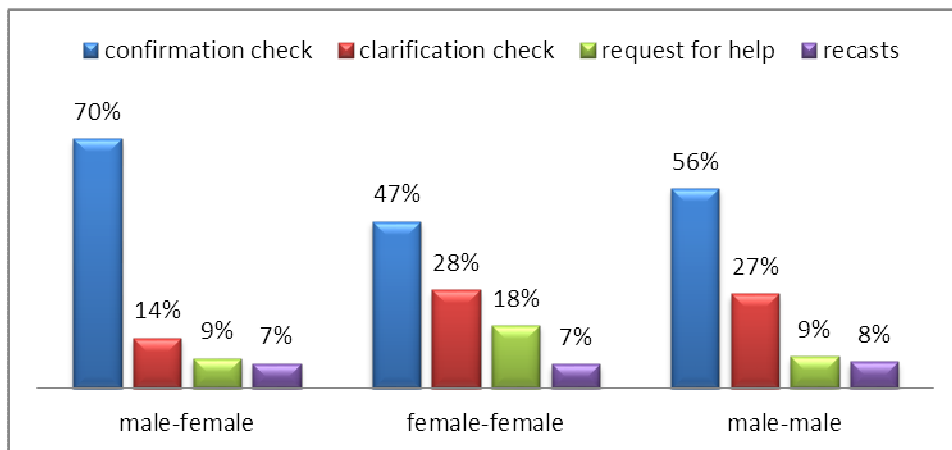


Table 4. Chi-Square tests

	Value	<i>df</i>	Asymp.Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.339 ^a	6	.078
Likelihood Ratio	11.531	6	.073
Linear-by-Linear Association	.710	1	.400
N of Valid Cases	276		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 5.07.

Moreover, the chi-square analysis (Table 4) showed that there was not any significant difference between male and female EFL learners' use of these MDs ((6, N= 24) = 11.34, $p=.078$). It shows that there is not any significant difference between male and female EFL learners in their use of modification devices during dyadic task-based interactions.

4. Discussion

4.1 The frequency of negative feedback

Negative or corrective feedback is considered as one of the salient features of conversational interaction by which the interlocutors detect the existing discrepancies in their output and try to resolve the communication breakdowns. Lyster and Ranta (1997) believed that corrective feedback encourages self-repair involving accuracy and precision as well as comprehensibility. Lyster, Lightbown, and Spada (1999) criticizing

Truscott's recommendations evidenced that "corrective feedback is pragmatically feasible, potentially effective, and, in some cases necessary" (p. 457). In support of such claims, Lyster's arguments (2001) can be taken into account: he argued that this type of feedback, or simply the act of signaling mismatches between target language production and non-target-like production, facilitates peer- and self-repair. Moreover, Gass and Varonis (1994) stated "that the awareness of the mismatch serves the function of triggering a modification of existing L2 knowledge, the results of which may show up at some later point in time" (p. 299).

One of the interesting results of the present study is that learners received negative feedback, regardless of their pairings, in response to a considerable number of their L2 non-target-like utterances; a total of 276 (55%) non-target-like utterances out of 502 received feedback. This is a bit more than the findings of Mackey et al. (2003) that reported 209 (34.31%) feedback instances out of 609. But these results are closer to the findings of Oliver (2009), who found that students in NNS-NNS dyads received 42% feedback regarding the rate of total non-target-like utterances. Although the developmental effects of feedback were not investigated in the present study, the achieved results do show that participation in task-based interactions can provide learners in NNS-NNS dyads with exposure to feedback in theoretically sufficient amounts, and they support claims regarding the importance of feedback as one of the benefits of interaction (Behnam & Davaribina, 2011; Gass, 1997; Long, 1996; Shehadeh, 2001; Swain, 1995). Moreover, empirical research (Bruton & Samuda, 1980; Long, 1996; Long & Porter, 1985; Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Panios & Linnell, 1996) suggests that NNS-NNS combinations tend to stimulate more negotiated interaction (through feedback) than NS-NNS dyads.

However, although all dyads consistently provided negative feedback, male-female dyads provided the most number of feedbacks in response to the total number of non-target-like utterances in their own dyads. This is in line with the findings of Rassaei and Tavakoli (2011) who found that error correction in same-gender dyads were superior to opposite-gender dyads.

Moreover, it was found that students in female-female dyads provided more feedback than those in male-male dyads, 57% and 50%, respectively. This can be in harmony with the findings of Shehadeh (1999) who noted, "It would appear that men take advantage of the conversation in a way that allows them to promote their performance/production ability, whereas women utilize the conversation to promote their comprehension ability" (p.256). In this vein, it is also worthy of notice that Aries's (1976) reports are in conflict with the findings of the present study since she reported that

males both initiated and received more interaction (through feedback provision) than females.

Although these findings appear to be conflicting at first, it should be considered that the relationship between language and gender is mediated by the social activities and practices of those particular speech communities (Ehrlich, 2001) and also by the different attitudes and learning conditions which are experienced by males and females (Saville-Troike, 2006). This suggests that different second language behaviors of learners with different genders can be attributed to their social contextualization.

4.2 Modification devices across dyads

The main concern of this study was verifying the MDs (or negotiation moves) that learners of different genders provided in dyadic interactions of different pairings. Interestingly, it was revealed that of the four corrective feedback moves specified in this study (confirmation checks, clarification checks, requests for help, and recasts) 57 percent belongs to confirmation checks, while recasts occurred less than others. These outcomes can be justified by what Oliver (2009) stated about the frequency of occurrence of recasts and other negotiation strategies in NNS-NNS interactions. She observed that rate of occurrence of recasts in NNS-NNS dyads was at least half of their occurrence in NS-NNS dyads perhaps because of the proficiency demands of these feedback forms. She also pointed out that the joint construction of meaning in order to defeat communication breakdowns requires negotiation strategies and that lower levels of proficiency of NNS partners may be more conducive of this form of feedback.

In such a similar vein, Lee (2002) investigated the MDs that NNSs use during synchronous online exchanges. She found that Spanish students used request for help strategy more than clarification checks and clarification checks more than confirmation checks, 17%, 16%, and approximately 10%, respectively. The existing difference here may be attributed to the difference between computer-mediated interaction and face-to-face interactions since Varonis and Gass (1985) and Porter (1986) reported higher frequencies of confirmation checks, clarification requests in face-to-face talk.

Furthermore, the results of the present study manifested that, except for request for help, male-male and female-female dyads used more confirmation checks, clarification checks, and recasts; and regarding request for help, female-female dyads provided the highest amount. These are in partial agreement with the findings of Ross-Feldman's (2005) study which showed that students in matched-gender dyads used more recasts than students in mixed-gender dyads.

However, Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001) proposed that the differing contexts of the research on the varying rates of uptake may account for these differences. Dissimilar language backgrounds of the participants, varying language skill levels, differences in age, gender, motivation and cognitive abilities of the students, different task types, and dissimilar language settings, such as ESL, EFL, private or immersion contexts, may also justify these diversities.

5. Conclusion

The current paper was concerned with investigating the quantity of incorporation of negative feedback in dyadic interactions of Iranian Azeri male and female students while performing tasks in pairs or dyads. It is worth mentioning here that the participants' differential L1 background can affect their performance as well; however since all participants in this study spoke the same L1 and were fluent in Persian (their L2) to a similar level, any effect the L1 background could have on their performance could therefore be equal to all candidates (males and females). That is why the role of L1 background was not taken into consideration in this study. The main purpose of the study was to examine the extent to which these male and female students with intermediate level of proficiency in the EFL context provide opportunities for their interlocutors to modify their output toward comprehensibility and what types of negotiation moves they use while interacting. Dyadic interaction of learners with their matched-proficiency counterpart seems to be pedagogically influential in second language learning and teaching as it provides learners with opportunities to interact and attend to linguistic forms and meaning, in the context of meaning-focused activities.

Given the extremely small body of previous research on modified output production in matched- versus mixed-gender dyads and male-male dyads versus female-female dyads and incorporation of modification devices (negotiation moves) across two-way versus one-way tasks, and open two-way versus closed two-way tasks, additional research on this issue, was clearly warranted. Consequently, the present study, trying to address this gap in the literature, investigated the provision of negative feedback, production of modified output, incorporation of four types of modification devices across genders of the interlocutors and task types.

The findings demonstrated a high frequency of negative feedback to non-target-like utterances occurred in the interactions of NNS dyads irrespective of the interlocutors' intermediate level of proficiency. Given the results observed in this study, it is important for researchers and teachers alike to know how to integrate dyadic interactions into the meaning-centered

classrooms to promote meaning negotiation by increasing the degree of students-students interactions. Teachers can be encouraged to utilize more meaning-focused activities by raising their awareness of its potential advantages. Moreover, the plentiful use of confirmation checks in interactions of intermediate students can be indicative of the fact that their level of proficiency is an influential factor determining their choices of using this particular type of modification device.

In spite of the conclusions drawn here regarding the potential value of involving students in dyadic task-based interactions across gender, one of the limitations of the study is its limited generalizability due to a small sample size: the data were driven from a sample of only 24 EFL language learners and using merely one example of three tasks over 10 hours of interactions.

Another limitation of this study is that it did not pay attention to the production of modified output and incorporation of modification devices in terms of their linguistic coverage in recorded interaction to explore the types of errors used by such learners. Moreover, while this research found that there is no significant difference between male and female EFL learners in their use of modification devices during dyadic task-based interactions, it did not focus on the major types of errors language learners of different genders produce. We recommend that future researchers take these points into consideration designing a similar research study.

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