Interest, Motivation and Engagement in EFL Group Dynamics: An Interactional Ethnography Approach

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[Abstract] This study attempts to detect the interest, motivation and engagement in EFL learner group Dynamic Interactions underneath the bottom-up Interactional Ethnography (IE) research framework. The Four-Phase Model of Interest Development was analyzed in the video recording and Expectancy-Value Theory was identified as the explanatory theory in interpreting the dynamic patterns of mini-skills teaching and learning interactive activities within a small group. The research findings provide initial empirical evidence on how to foster and scaffold effective self-regulation to continue the learners' interest, booster their motivation and effective engagement in achieving the success expectancy.

[Keywords] interest, motivation, engagement, EFL group dynamics, interactional ethnography

Introduction

Educational scientists adopted group work in classroom practice, which has become a common pedagogical activity in support of a wide range of teaching contexts. However, the extent of engagement of individual members in group work has not been well examined and little attention on distinction of the teaching contents tailored for highly-motivated learners and less-motivated learners have been drawn by educators or researchers. This study attempts to provide empirical evidence of engagement proof in group work of business English students with great interest and full motivation. In contrast to taking interest and motivation as psychological parameters, an Interactional Ethnography (IE) approach was adopted in this study to identify the engagement extent of each individual group member recorded in a ten-minute video recording.

This research introduces the conceptual framework of the research method (IE) and clarification of interest, motivation and engagement. Interactional ethnography is a philosophy which integrated multiple theoretical frameworks to analyze the construct of life in a wide range of settings (Castanheria, et al., 2007). The current research adopted a different research approach of class observation and classroom learning environment as one of the major contexts in which IE approach would be involved in. Expected-Value Theory was adopted as the explanatory theory to further support the research findings in the current research.

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework – Interactional Ethnography

From the essence of its nature, the IE approach adopts a bottom-up and explanatory way to examine events. Other well-established theoretical frameworks might also be appropriate to be adopted to examine the engagement of individual group member's performance in a cooperative group activity, such as semi-structured interviews or longitude qualitative research. However, IE is different from a top-down structured theoretical research approach; it puts emphasis on formulating patterns that emerged from bottom-up findings in the event (Dixon, Green, & Brandts, 2005). The IE approach would allow researchers to observe the event and spot the rich point with no pre-expectations. By using logic of inquiry approach, an explanatory theory can be drawn.

The iterative and recursive nature of IE meets the demands of continuous observations of individual group members' performance. In the Four-Phase Model of Interest Development, the extent of each group member's interest may vary on distinctive phases that have been identified by scholars (Hidi, & Renninger, 2006), which includes a triggered situational interest, a maintained situational interest, an emerging individual interest and a well-developed individual interest. The four phases of interests suggested show a continuous interest development of an individual learner in a group activity. IE conceptual framework breaks down the time and space boundaries and allows researchers to move back and forward to identify the differential performance of each individual participant in the group in accordance to the sequential interest development phases. In addition, the interactions between group members would help research observers to set boundaries of each interest phase and testify the engagement of the targeted group member.

IE, as a bottom-up analytical approach, is suitable to be adopted in initial studies on observation events. The patterns of interest, motivation and engagement may not be easily measured in a quantitative way. The IE approach could provide a comprehensive picture on examining the latent variables and explanatory theories would be testified in this approach. Furthermore, the IE approach could apply cross-disciplinary knowledge in explaining observing events. In this study, psychological, educational and social linguistic disciplines are involved in the target video recording. IE could make full use of the different theories in attempt to explain the phenomenon of the event. And the expectancy-value theory (Eccles, 2009) emerged to be the explanatory theory in this study.

Clarification of Interest, Motivation and Engagement

Interest is widely categorized into the psychological discipline (Renninger & Hidi, 2011). It is an affective and cognitive parameter which could vary on the four-phase development indicated in the Four-Phase Model of Interest Development (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Interest may vary on the four distinct stages. Scaffolding of peer support or the task contents would be essential to push the development of interest forward, such as positive feedback from peer group members or raising further questions to arouse peer students' curiosity to explore the topic. Otherwise, the triggered interest may fade away gradually and will not proceed so that learnerscan experience the following phases of interest.

Comparing with interest, motivation is a broader concept with no restrictions to specific disciplinary contents. It is also similar to interests and combines multiple elements such as the learning environment, cognition and affect (Volet & Jarvela, 2001). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivators were clarified and adopted in motivation research studies (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). In this study, the maintenance of goal oriented intrinsic motivation is discussed, which is related to learners' self-achievement. Motivation starts with triggered interest but will not go through a developmental stage like interest with meaningful connection and promoting curiosity questions. Motivation particularly depends on self-regulations or learner's expectancy-value. More motivated learners tend to be better self-disciplined individual and can direct their own behavior towards success. Social cognitive model of self-regulation suggests modeling and scaffolding to promote the self-regulation development (Zimmerman, 1989; 2001). Modeling facilitates learners by providing knowledge information or samples or showing the possible learning outcomes. The scaffolding involved support from peer students, teachers or parents.

Engagement was regarded as both learner initiation of action, effort and persistence in fulfilling the task and affective state while experiencing the task (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). It is a multi-construct involving behavior, affect and cognition (Fredricks, et al., 2004). In this study, engagement is defined as socio-emotional and cognitive aspects of the learning environment with its multi-faceted nature. Interest and motivation will contribute the productive engagement to achieve the task and promote positive engagement with the learning environment. Learners' feedback and response in a group work may reflect their engagement in the learning process. Triggered interest and motivations with scaffolding support will lead to productive engagement for the learners.

Addressing Research Questions

From the IE research perspective, the patterns of different interest development phases, motivation and engagement in group activities were observed, examined and constructed based on the principal findings with little prior assumptions and frameworks presumed. Thus, the research question in this study follows the bottom-up research process and digs into the nature of interest, motivation and engagement in adult group activities.

Research Design

This research was conducted in a tertiary-level higher education institute in mainland China. The research design followed the IE approach of philosophy. Both verbal and nonverbal factors were observed and examined in this study. Verbal elements interact with language use and textual analysis in the video recording; nonverbal factors investigated include body language, eye gaze, the learning environment and scaffolding support during the activity. A ten-minute video recording in English as a foreign language (EFL) workshop was adopted to demonstrate the interest, motivation and engagement studies. With prior ethical approval of the group members in the video, data were collected, analyzed and constructed in this research. The video data was collected with support of course teachers and data coding construction was done by the researcher. For limitation of time, no triangulation study was conducted such as a questionnaire, interviews or think-aloud qualitative research methods.

In this study, conversation texts presented by the video were transcribed by the researcher and inter-rater process was conducted in due course. Textual analysis was conducted accordingly in order to demonstrate the invisible latent variable of interest, motivation and engagement into visible language signals. Non-verbal factors were coded as well such as the eye gaze, body gesture, peer support and facial expressions were examined to support the verbal findings. To show a more comprehensive picture of this research, the language curriculum syllabus and specific requirement of in-class activities for the EFL group learners were provided to provide rationale for the findings and display a broader context for this study. In the language workshop, thirty-six students were divided into separate small groups. Various group activities of language communication were conducted concurrently in the same classroom. Thus, it was not difficult to identify that other groups' sound and noise may affect or interfere the separate small groups' discussions. Based on the literature review, learning environment is one factor to be considered in the engagement study. In this case study, for the small classroom environment, background noise was evaluated.

Participants

A mixed group of teachers and students were involved in this video recording. The course teacher was one group member along with two other female students in this course. Since the involvement of the course teacher may indicate different results of the engagement findings, the research context might be different from the pure students' group. All three of them were adult learners in this group activity. The two student group members were business English language learners at the senior level.

Research Method

This paper aims to demonstrate the notion of underneath an interactional ethnographic framework in the context of mini-skills' instructions among group members in language workshop course. Three or four students formed a group and interacted with one another in the game instructing section. With prior mutual agreement of the participants in this video, Transana software was adopted to transcribe and code the conversations in the interactive process. Iterative and recursive discourse patterns would be identified with the support of an event map, which functioned as a reflection to provide a comprehensive picture in the event process. Rich points as anchors emerged to be identified.

Archives Collected ‐ *Video Recording*

In this study, a video of approximately eleven minutes in length was collected. Multi-modal analysis was conducted in viewing the sound, image and movements of the characters in the video. The video was well recorded. The reasons to choose this video for examination are as follows: (1) mixed components of group members of both students and a course teacher provide multiple angles to observe the actors; (2) the failure of the magic show performance as a turning point provided rich contents to analyze the feedback and support from the other group members. The development of interest was enhanced at this turning point; (3) to fulfill the course assignment requirement, approximately ten minutes recordings were appropriate to conduct a deeper understanding of IE approach in practice.

Principal Findings and Discussions

The principal findings of the current research are described as follows.
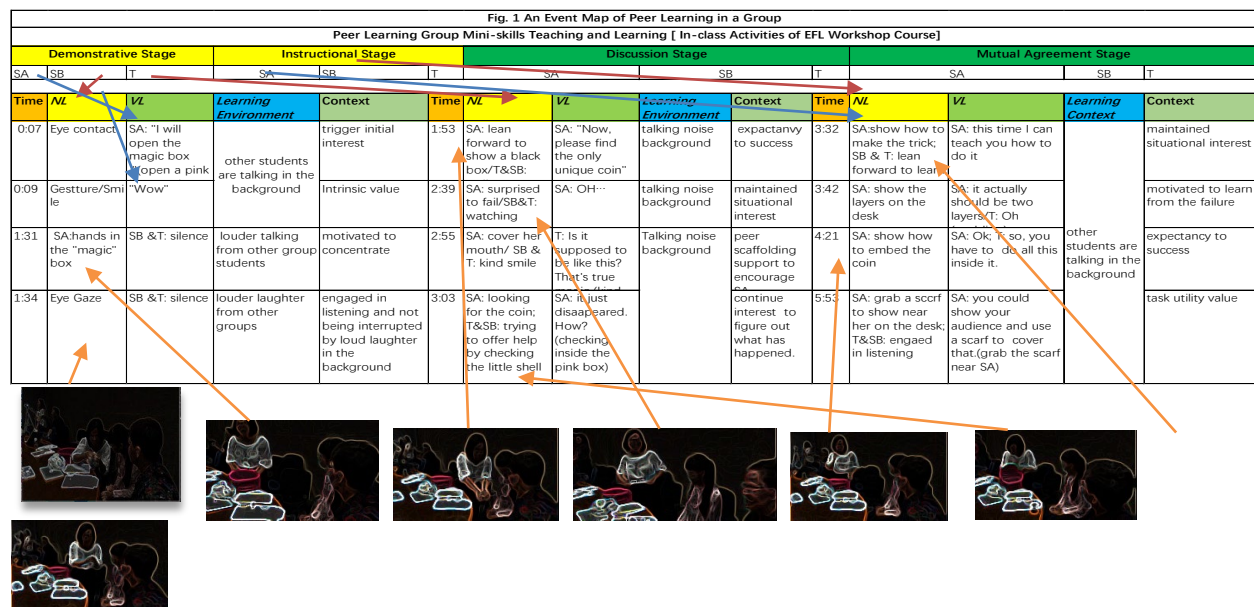
Note: NL: nonverbal body language; VL: verbal language

Figure 1. Construction of an Event Map-IE Research Framework

Take the magic performance shown in the observed video as one example: the triggered situational phase means the magician's performance prior to the instructions acted as warming up exercise to stimulate other group members' interest to learn more about the magic show; the maintained situational interest means that even though the magic show failed at last, the class requirement of successful learning of this magic show maintained the interests of other group activity participants. If there is no specific requirement of teaching other group members to learn well this trick, the interest of learning might not be sustained among other group members. an emerging individual interest means that the other group members have the questions about why or why not the magic show works or not. The group discussion maps this. On this phase of interest, even though the magic show performer failed in the task, she sustained the other group members' interest by attempting to explain the true reasons for the success and failure of this performance in the future. This question was to arouse the individual member's curiosity. Thus, learners with individual interest may have curiosity questions. But the scope of these may have constraints.

A well-developed individual interest means that learners are excited to learn more about the topic or the task itself. In the magic show case study, the other group members might be eager to practice the performance outside the classroom setting for their friends or families. They may learn more about magic show and transfer this learnt knowledge in other disciplines or fields. However, the extent of excitement on a well-developed individual interest phase may not be the same as the triggered situational phase.

However, interest may not be indicated by the extent of excitement suggested in the neuroscience field. But the values and knowledge gained in the process are good indicators of presenting interest. Thus, the boundaries of the four phase interest developments were identified by interactions within group members during which feedback of knowledge recognition and obtaining were confirmed by the research observer.

Explanatory Theory: Expected-Value Theory

Expectancy-value theory (EVT) has been developed and adopted in a wide range of fields including, education, health, and marketing, etc. The implications in various fields may be different. It was originally developed by John William Atkinson in the 1950s to demonstrate the achievement motivation of individuals. Eccles (1983) extended the EVT into education field in the 1980s. In EVT theory, expectancy refers to learners' expectancy of success and the confidence of the individual learner for final achievement of the task; while the value refers to subjective task values and relate to emotional state of individual learner's perception of the task involving usefulness, entertainment or its significance. The interactions of expectancy and values will predict the outcomes of a well-developed individual interest, more intrinsic motivation and full engagement through effective self-regulation. The expectancy to success shapes learners' behavior and choices they make, which is tied up with self-concept and self-efficacy. Values is related to motivation and is composed of four subcategories: Attainment Value (Importance for identity or self), Intrinsic Value (Enjoyment or Interest), Utility Value (Usefulness or Relevance), and Cost (loss of time, overly-high effort demands, loss of valued alternatives, or negative psychological experiences such as stress) (Eccles, 2009).   The attainment and intrinsic values are inclined to direct to interest development, intrinsic motivation and persistent engagement.

Expectancy-value theory serves to explain the observations of the short video recording in the current research. Group members' interest to magic performance trigged their learning interest and expectancy of the magic show success extend their motivation to active learning by asking curious questions on the possible reasons of the failure. Supportive feedback and kind smile reactions to the performance failure scaffold the student performer to continue the instructions of the performance. Peer students' positive support booster the full engagement in this group activity. Furthermore, the enjoyable previous experience of watching magic show highlighted the intrinsic value and utility value, which promote the peer students' motivation on deep learning on how to realize it on their own in the future. The learning environment should also be considered in this study. Other group's loud sound interruptions did not affect the full engagement of the observed group activity, even when their group members' voices were covered by the surrounding noise. The group members still fully concentrated on the teacher's talk and tried to offer immediate feedback to the teacher questions that were constantly raised. No abstractions were observed in this video recording throughout the discussion process.

Conclusion

This study attempts to detect the interest, motivation and engagement in EFL learner group activities. This research explored the research topic in a bottom-up manner. Thus, no conclusive summary was reached based on the initial findings. The findings in this research provide initial empirical evidence on the interest, motivation and engagement exploration in the academic education context. More studies in various contexts will be needed to explore the nature of group work engagement and how to foster and scaffold effective

self-regulation to continue the learners' interest, booster their motivation and effective engagement in achieving their success expectancy.

Acknowledgement

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