Does gender influence task performance in EFL? Interactive tasks and language related episodes

Agurtzane Azkarai and María del Pilar García Mayo

There are differences in the way males and females use language (Aries, 1976; Ross-Feldman, 2005, 2007). However, the role that gender plays in second language acquisition (SLA) does not seem to have been studied in depth. This factor is fundamental for the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), as interaction opportunities have been claimed to depend on gender (Ross-Feldman, 2005, 2007).

This paper aims to investigate whether gender influences conversational interaction and whether different communicative tasks have an impact on the type of interaction matched (male-male and female-female) and mixed (male-female) gender dyads engage in. The results showed that type of dyad did not influence the incidence of language related episodes (LREs) when pairs work on specific tasks, that the different tasks influence the learner's production of LREs and that most LREs were resolved correctly.

1 Introduction

Several studies have shown that there are differences in the way males and females use language (Aries, 1976; Ross-Feldman, 2007; Tannen, 1990, among others). It seems that when men and women interact, men have more opportunities to participate and control conversational turns than women. However the role that gender plays in second language acquisition (SLA) does not seem to have been studied in depth. This individual variable is fundamental for the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1983; 1996), which states that conversational interaction facilitates second language (L2) learning. Input or modifications to the input received in the learning process might be different depending on social status, gender and culture of the participants. Thus, it is of special interest to consider these variables to contribute to a better understanding of such a complex phenomenon.

The main goal of this paper is to investigate whether gender influences conversational interaction and whether different communicative tasks have an impact on the type of interaction matched (male-male and female-female) and mixed (male-female) gender dyads engage in. Inspired by recent work carried out by Ross-Feldman (2007) with participants from El Salvador who were learning English as second language (ESL) in the USA, this paper examines the oral production of 12 (6 male, 6 female) Basque-Spanish bilinguals learning English as Foreign Language (EFL) in the Basque Country.

This paper is structured as follows: section 2 provides a brief overview of the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) and its main constructs: input, output and feedback. Special attention will be paid to Language Related Episodes (LREs) as they have been identified as the site where L2 learning may occur (Swain and Lapkin, 1998, 2001, 2002) and they are a key concept in this study. This background section will also provide information about the gender variable in first language (L1) and L2 acquisition and about tasks because they are the main data-gathering instrument in interaction research. Section 3 presents the study itself, its purpose and motivation, research questions entertained, participants and procedure. Section 4 comments the findings obtained from the experimental study and section 5 summarizes the main conclusions.

2 Background

2.1 The Interaction Hypothesis

Mackey (2007a) notes that since the early 1980s the relationship between conversational interaction and learning has been one of the core issues in L2 research, both in English as Second Language (ESL) (Mackey, 2007b) and in EFL (Alcón and García Mayo, 2008, 2009; García Mayo and Alcón, 2002, forthcoming). There is a wide range of empirical studies that deal with the relationship between interaction and learning pointing to the idea that interaction benefits learning. Back in 1978 Hatch argued that learners learn the structure of a language through interaction rather than learning grammar in order to interact. Krashen (1982, 1985), however, claimed that exposure to comprehensible input was a necessary and sufficient condition for L2 learning. Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996) considered input as a foundational construct, the *sine qua non* of acquisition. However, *contra* Krashen, Long argues that comprehensible input alone is not enough to promote the process of L2 learning. There is enough evidence to date supporting Long's Hypothesis on the basis of all the detailed research carried out since the 1980s in Canadian immersion programs, where native speakers of English learned French, (Allen, Swain, Harley and Cummins, 1990; Genesee, 1987; Lambert and Tucker, 1972; Lyster, 2007; among many others). After several years and thousands of hours of exposure to real language, the learners

communicated fluently but not accurately. They reached native-like levels in listening and reading but not in speaking and writing (Genesee, 1987), precisely the skills where the learners had to produce information. Ellis (1992) had already observed that the need to communicate may raise learners' awareness of language with a resulting increase in attention to form and a heightened tendency to notice mismatches between input and output. Learners' attention to and noticing of mismatches between the input received and their output determines whether or not they progress (Schmidt and Frota, 1986). Attention and noticing, or conscious perception (for which attention is a prerequisite), are widely claimed to be both necessary and sufficient to focus items from linguistic input and store them in long-term memory, turning input into intake, at least for low-level grammatical items, such as plural or third person singular *s* (Schmidt, 1990, 1993, 1994).

Thus, although early researchers assumed that output did not play a significant role in the L2 acquisition process (Krashen, 1985) and that it only served as evidence that acquisition had occurred, Swain was convinced that learners' output had a number of benefits. Swain (1985 *et passim)* proposed the Output Hypothesis, which claims that the act of producing language (speaking or writing) constitutes part of the process of L2 learning. It is by producing language that (i) fluency (automatization) is promoted, (ii) attention to linguistic problems is drawn, (iii) syntactic processing rather than just meaning is encouraged and (iv) hypotheses about the target language are tested.

Besides input and output, feedback is another important construct in the Interaction Hypothesis. Feedback is the information that learners receive from their interlocutors about their language production and can come from teachers and/or other learners. The Interaction Hypothesis is primarily concerned with reactive feedback, which occurs as a reaction to some linguistic problem that any of the interlocutors has. Feedback can be provided explicitly by means of metalinguistic comments (for example when the teacher says "No, we don't say *x* in English; we say *y* because *x* is a noun"), or implicitly, which is the type of feedback interaction research is most interested in.

Another construct relevant in interactional work is that of language related episode (LRE). LREs are those occasions in which learners make use of interactional features to attend to linguistic elements in their conversation. They occur when learners focus on matters of language form and meaning and these include " […] *all* interaction in which learners draw attention to form, that is, those that focus on form in the context of meaningful communication as well as those that are set apart from such communication and simply revolve around question of form itself' (Williams, 1999: 595). Consider the following example:

(1) Male learner 1:   ...that is-it is partly-partly inherited, no?
      Male learner 2:   How do you spell that?
      Male learner 1:   I-N-H-E-R-I-T-E-D? I think…I'm not sure but…

In this brief excerpt from data of the current study, male learner 2 does not know how to spell the word "inherited". He asks his partner who solves his doubt.

The use of LREs has been claimed to be directly related to language learning (Adams, 2007; Loewen, 2004). During an LRE a learner raises an issue about the target language and the other learner has the option to either join in the discussion or move on with the task at hand. The incidence of LREs varies depending on several factors such as learner's proficiency and learning activity (Ellis *et al.*, 2001a, 2001b; Loewen, 2003 2004; Swain and Lapkin, 1998, 2002; Williams, 1999, 2001).

2.2. The gender variable

Interaction may vary depending on several factors such as the participants' ethnic groups, social classes, culture or gender (Aries, 1996; Henley, 1995; Melzi and Fernández, 2004; Reid, Haritos, Kelly and Holland, 1995). Many studies in first language acquisition have shown that there are gender differences during conversational interaction among native speakers. For example, Tannen (1990) found that males and females acted differently from each other during the interaction with a same-gender friend. She also found that males generally discussed many topics briefly and that their discussions were more abstract and focused on less personal issues than females' discussions, while females talked more overall and discussed fewer topics than males.
There are also differences between males and females in mixed-gender settings that show that males discuss a wider range of topics in these settings, and that they seem to control conversational interactions. Females, on the other hand, restrict their topics during the conversation with males and allow the conversational control of men by making statements indicating solidarity and agreement with them (Aries, 1976; Bohn and Stutman, 1983).

West and Garcia (1988) found that men initiated the majority of topic changes curtailing women's topic development and failing to follow up on what women were discussing. Holmes (1994) found that females supported males' conversations more than males did with women's conversations:

> "[…] while the men had the benefit of attentive, responsive and encouraging listeners, the women received relatively little support for their contributions, and were given less encouragement to continue when they did speak".

(Holmes, 1994: 161)

Itakura (2001) examined the conversations of female and male native speakers of Japanese who engaged in a ten-minute conversation in English and Japanese. What she found was that males were less dominant in their L2, English, than in their L1, Japanese. Itakura suggested that whether an individual has a self-oriented or other-oriented conversational style may play a role in whether conversational dominance translates from L1 to L2 as self-oriented speakers pursue topics that are of interest to them while other oriented speakers develop topics more collaboratively with their conversational partners. Depending on the context and the individuals involved, there may be differences in interactional style between males and females, and these differences cannot be assumed to automatically transfer from L1 to L2 (Ross-Feldman, 2007).

On the basis of the above-mentioned studies, it would seem that in male-female conversational interactions males have more opportunities to participate and control conversations than females. Moreover, depending on the gender of their conversational partner during interaction, speakers of both genders seem to alter their conversational moves. For example, Aries (1976) concluded that males spoke more than females, but that also both, males and females, directed more conversation to males than to females.

As for SLA, there have been some studies dealing with L2 interaction focusing on the role gender plays during L2 learning. Thus, in a study about the interactions of pairs composed of adult language learners, Gass and Varonis (1986) found that most negotiations occurred in male-female dyads, followed by male-male dyads. They suggested that males and females negotiated more in mixed-gender pairs than in matched-gender pairs and that men dominated the amount of talk and the performance of the task in mixed-gender pairs. Males also showed non-understanding with a greater frequency than females (Gass and Varonis, 1985; Kasanga, 1996).

Pica and her colleagues (Pica *et al.*, 1989; Pica *et al.,* 1991) found no significant differences for the incidence of negotiation in different types of dyads in conversation between learners and native speakers. However female native speakers negotiated more with male learners than with female learners and female learners negotiated more with female native speakers than with male native speakers. Pica *et al.* (1991) did not find any significant difference for males, either learners or native speakers, but it seemed that female learners might be more sensitive to the influence of gender than males. Oliver (2002) studied the effect of gender on interactions between child language learners and she did not find any significant difference between male-male and female-female dyads.

Along the same lines but in an EFL setting, Alcón and Codina (1996) studied the impact of gender on negotiation and vocabulary learning in a situation of interaction. Results of the study indicated that learners' gender could not be considered a discriminating factor with regard to the amount of negotiation, although female involvement in negotiation was superior to males'.

More recently, Ross-Feldman (2007) analyzed the correlation between gender and conversational interaction. In her detailed study she investigated the influence of learner gender on L2 task-based interactions and the language learning opportunities that arose during such interactions. Specifically, she investigated the incidence and resolution of LREs in conversational interaction with the goal of shedding light on ultimate learning possibilities for males and females engaging in task-based interactions.

The participants in her study were 32 females and 32 males whose L1 was Spanish and who were learning English in an adult language-learning centre in the USA. Ross-Feldman's findings indicated that the gender of the learners participating in task-based interactions influenced the incidence and resolution of LREs. In mixed-gender dyads, the LREs initiated by males were resolved more often than those initiated by females. This might lead to a situation in which males have more opportunities to learn from the interaction than females. Moreover, LREs initiated by males were resolved in a more targetlike manner in mixed-gender dyads. On the other hand, LREs initiated by females were resolved more frequently in a targetlike manner on matched-gender dyads. So while males had more opportunities to learn a language in mixed-gender dyads, females have more opportunities in matched-gender dyads.

Males were advantaged in mixed-gender dyads because of their increased attention and they resolved questions about matters of language use. Females were advantaged in matched-gender dyads because their questions about language use were more likely to be resolved when they worked with other females. Similar to previous research findings on language and gender, topics raised by males in this study were resolved more often than those raised by females. The trend was for LREs initiated by learners of both genders to be resolved more often and in a more

targetlike manner when interacting with females than with males. This would strengthen the possibility that the learning resulting from LREs could be influenced by the gender composition of the dyad, with males having more opportunities to learn in mixed-gender dyads and females having greater language-learning opportunities in matched-gender dyads.

Ross-Feldman concluded that, although both males and females seemed to be advantaged by working with female language learners, the learning that results from LREs may be affected by gender as well.

2.3 Tasks in conversational interaction

The goal of much interaction-based research involves manipulating the kinds of interaction that learners are involved in, the kind of feedback they receive and the kind of output they produce. In order to determine the relationships of the various components of interaction and L2 learning (Gass and Mackey, 2007), the most common way of gathering data is to involve learners in a variety of well-designed tasks.

Tasks are goal-oriented activities that facilitate the use of language in order to communicate meaning (Bygate *et al.*, 2001; Crookes, 1986; Long and Robinson, 1998; Nunan, 1991; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1998; Willis, 1996). Tasks provide learners with opportunities to interact and receive and give information, and for this reason they are an ideal tool for both classroom use and for testing theoretical claims about L2 acquisition.

They have become central to both L2 research and pedagogy and nowadays they provide a fruitful area of common ground between research and practice (García Mayo, 2007; Mackey, 2007a).

Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993) classified tasks depending on the type of information exchange they generate. For example, in one-way tasks only one interlocutor holds the information to be conveyed to the other participant. In a two-way task both participants have part of the information that needs to be shared. Tasks can also require an open outcome, that is when there is no predetermined answer or solution, or a closed outcome, when the task requires a specific solution. Research has shown that interaction is best promoted by tasks that have a two-way required exchange of information and a closed outcome (Pica et al., 1993).

In order for tasks to be successful, collaborative work is important. Interaction provides students with opportunities to engage in language learning processes that are going to facilitate their L2 learning. It is important then that students are encouraged to work in pairs collaboratively on language tasks, since they may reach grammatically correct decisions when working with their partners, or peers (Storch, 2001).

Some authors (Pica, 1991; Storch, 2001, 2007; among others) have demonstrated that working in pairs or in small groups (3 members) benefits the students with opportunities to give and receive feedback (Pica and Doughty, 1985; Varonis and Gass, 1985). These studies have shown that compared to teacher-fronted classes or Native Speakers (NS) - Non-Native Speakers (NNS) pairs, learners in groups or in NNS-NNS pairs engage in more modified interactions, or what Long (1983) calls 'negotiation of meaning'.

Storch (1999) investigated if students working in pairs and discussing their grammatical choices produced more accurate written texts than students working on similar exercises individually. Students tended to revise their text many times when working collaboratively whereas, when working individually, students completed their work quickly and did not revise their work before submitting it to the teacher. Collaboration and metatalk (talking about language) generated during interaction led to an improvement in the grammatical accuracy of the texts that were produced.

Storch (2001) analyzed if there was any connection between the way pairs interact and the quality of the final written output. Her results showed that there was evidence of speech co-construction, knowledge extension and scaffolding assistance in those pairs which adopted a collaborative orientation. Storch (2001) places importance on collaboration arguing that in her study pairs that collaborated produced more precise texts.

Kowal and Swain (1994) suggested that proficiency level between the members of the dyad may reduce collaboration in the learners' interaction. That is, students may be more demotivated when their partner is more competent or has a higher level in the language that he/she is learning. The results obtained by Storch (2001) demonstrated that this was not the case. In her study the more collaborative pair was the one in which the levels of both learners differed.

In more recent work Storch (2007) investigated the merits of pair work by comparing pair and individual work on a text editing task and the results she obtained showed that pairs took longer to complete the task. These results suggest that pairs paid more attention to items that needed amendment, and provide another explanation for the slightly larger number of corrections made by pairs compared to individuals. Interestingly, the study found no statistically significant differences in the accuracy of texts edited by pairs compared to those edited by students working individually. However, the pair talk data did show that a high proportion of LREs were resolved interactively, when the learners had an opportunity to use and reflect about language use. Seeking and receiving information, providing each other with explicit and implicit negative feedback gave most learners opportunities to learn. Providing an explanation is also beneficial for learners because it forces them to clarify and organize their own knowledge and enhance their own understanding. Repetitions or imitation may also

facilitate the appropriation and internalization of new forms. It indicates that the learner has noticed his error and tries to correct it. Although Storch's (2007) study did not find statistically significant differences in the accuracy of texts edited by pairs compared to those edited by students working individually, the analysis of pair talk showed that learners benefited from working collaboratively in pairs on grammar-focused tasks.

3 The present study

3.1 Purpose and motivation

The present study aims to investigate whether gender influences conversational interaction and whether different communicative tasks have an impact on the type of interaction matched and mixed gender dyads engage in. It has been inspired by Ross-Feldman's (2007) recent work on the topic. As already mentioned participants in her study were learning English as a second language (ESL) and came mainly from El Salvador. These participants carried out different communicative tasks in mixed and matched-gender dyads. The findings obtained showed that women seemed to be ignored in most of the cases in which they initiated a LRE, while men obtained answers to all their doubts.

One of the reasons one might speculate this could have happened is the sociological context the participants came from. As mentioned above, Ross-Feldman's participants came mainly from El Salvador, a country where the role of women is very different from the one in most European countries. Specifically, Góchez (2006) reports that Salvadorian women are integrating gradually into the developmental process of the country but he provides data that indicate the disparities still existing between men and women. For example, just as an illustration, men have double *per capita* income than women. In the urban areas, there are 17.7% more poor women than men and women's salaries are 24.2% lower than those of men.

As the origin of the participants could have biased the findings of her study, the present paper reports the interaction between matched and mixed gender pairs of Basque-Spanish bilinguals learning English in an EFL context. The role of women in Europe is different from the one in Central America. Specifically, in the Basque Country women are present in politics, the university, private companies and most of them work outside the home, thus having economic independence from men, a point which sets them apart from the overwhelming majority of women in El Salvador.

From a methodological point of view, Ross-Feldman herself (2007: 76) calls for the use of more and different task types in order to fully explore how task and gender interrelate. In the study we have carried out, we have included not only the three tasks used by Ross-Feldman but also a fourth one, all of which will be described in section 3.4 below.

3.2 Research questions

On the basis of previous research carried out on the influence of gender in L2 interaction and the importance of LREs (cf. section 2), we entertain the following research questions for the current study:

   i. Does type of dyad (male-male (MM), female-female (FF), male-female (MF)) influence the incidence of language related episodes (LRE) when pairs are working on specific tasks?
   ii. How does the type of task used in conversational interaction influence the learner's production of LREs? Do information-gap tasks (picture placement and picture differences) generate more LREs than collaborative tasks (picture story and dictogloss)?
   iii. If LREs are generated, are they resolved or unresolved?

3.3 Participants

Twelve participants, six males and six females took part in this study. They were all born in the Basque Country and were Spanish-Basque bilinguals. Most of them (9) were students of English Philology and three of them were students of Basque Philology, all of them at the University of the Basque Country. Their English proficiency level was intermediate (lower or upper), as established by the standardized Quick Oxford Placement Test (Syndicate U.C.L.E., 2001). They were paired in dyads on the basis of their test results.

3.4 Procedure

Table 1 describes the tasks used in Ross-Feldman's study, which we have also used in ours in order to establish the appropriate comparisons. These tasks are similar to the one available in commercial ESL/EFL text books.

	Picture Differences	Picture Placement	Picture Story
Description	Without showing each other their pictures, learners must work together to identify ten differences between the pictures	Without showing each other their pictures, learners must help each other place the missing objects in their pictures of a kitchen in order to make their kitchens identical	Learners work together to arrange eight pictures in the correct order to tell a story and then to write the story
Version A	People in a park	Each learner must place five items in his/her kitchen	Two travelers who accidentally switch luggage
Version B	People on a beach	Each learner must place five items in his/her kitchen	A girl with an unusual alarm clock who gets ready for school
Type	Information Gap	Information Gap	Collaborative
Flow of information	Two-way	One-way repeated	Two-way
Exchange of information	Required	Required	Optional
Outcome	Closed	Closed	Closed

Table 1: Tasks used in the present study

Ross-Feldman used two information gap tasks (picture differences and picture placement) and a collaborative task, but she did not include a type of task that has been reported to encourage learners to reflect in their own output, a focus-on-form task such as dictogloss (Wajnryb, 1990). She herself acknowledges that different task types should be used (Ross-Feldman, 2007:76) and that's why this study has included dictogloss as a fourth option.

Dictogloss favors collaborative work (Wajnryb, 1990). It is an activity which has been claimed to encourage learners to reflect on their own output (Kowal and Swain, 1994; Swain, 1998; Swain and Lapkin, 1994, 2001). In dictogloss a short text is read (twice) at normal speed to the learners; the first time they just listen, and when the text is read the second time, students write down some key words they think will help to rewrite the original text. Both participants of the dyad work together to reconstruct the final version of the text and so, they refine their understanding of the language being used (García Mayo, 2002a, 2002b; Wajnryb, 1990). The dictogloss promotes the collaboration between both members of the pair and activates the cognitive processes necessary for the acquisition of second languages.

Dictogloss is designed to draw learners' attention to language form. During dictogloss, students come to notice their grammatical strengths and weaknesses and they try to overcome these weaknesses when attempting to co-produce the text (Nassaji, 2000: 247). Four texts were chosen from Wajnryb (1990). Two texts were taken from the pre-intermediate section: the first one was a 63-word passage entitled "A record on wheels" (page 34) and the second one was a 73-word passage entitled "Miracle plunge" (page 37). The other two texts were taken from the intermediate section of the same book. The first one was a 53-word passage entitled "Intelligence: nature or nurture?" (page 53) and the second one was an 87-word passage entitled "Tips for travelers: planning a trip". Texts of two different levels (pre-intermediate and intermediate) were chosen for the experiment since participants' results in the Oxford Placement Test were also two (lower or upper intermediate). The two pre-intermediate texts were presented in dyads in which participants' level was lower-intermediate (one text per dyad in order for participants not to repeat the same text) and the two intermediate texts were presented in dyads in which participants' level was upper-intermediate. Thus, participants had to complete a total of 4 different tasks (dictogloss, picture placement task, picture differences task and picture story task) with a partner of their same gender and with a partner of a different gender.

There were 6 mixed-gender dyads, that is, 6 MF dyads, and 6 matched-gender dyads, that is, 3 MM dyads and 3 FF dyads. Participants completed the task in a seminar room located at the Psycholinguistics Laboratory of the University of the Basque Country and all of the transcriptions where recorded and video-taped. Students granted permission for their data to be used for academic purposes.

Participants were free to complete the tasks in the order they wanted. The time they needed to complete each task lasted between 5 and 10 minutes. They were seated in front of each other so that they could not see their partner's pictures during the picture placement and the picture differences tasks.

Participants had to complete the experiment in two sessions. As they were students and they had different class schedules, in the first session they were paired either with someone of their same gender or someone of a different gender. In this first session, which lasted between 25-30', they were asked to complete the four tasks described above. The second took place a few days later (depending on the participants' agenda) and each participant had to complete the task with someone of their same or different gender, depending on the partner they had on the first session. In this last session, which also lasted between 25-30', participants had to complete the other version of the task. Finally, they were asked to complete an opinion questionnaire in order to express their opinions about the tasks, their partners and the experiment as a whole.

Ross-Feldman (2005) examines LREs to determine if gender differences exist in their frequency or type. She used the following coding-sequence of LREs:
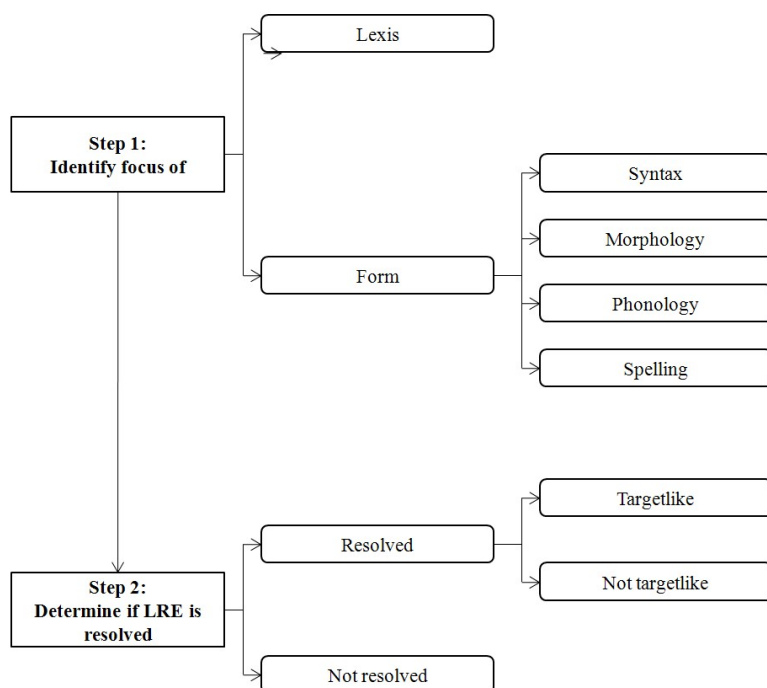
(From Ross-Feldman, 2005: 97)
Figure 1: Coding-sequence of LREs.

As can be seen, the first step in coding her data was the identification of the focus (lexis or form) of the LRE. Secondly, Ross-Feldman determined whether the LRE was solved (resolved vs. not resolved) and, if so, how (targetlike vs. non-targetlike).

3.5 Data codification

Once the participants completed the tasks, all their conversational interactions, which amounted to 4 hours, 59 minutes and 59 seconds, had   to be transcribed. Then, the total incidence of LREs was analyzed as a proportion of LREs to the total turns taken by the learners to complete the different tasks. In this study the results were codified according to (i) the incidence of LREs, that is, the quantification of LREs in each dyad, (ii) the resolution (or not) of LREs and (iii) the resolution (correct or incorrect) of the LREs. Consider the following examples (from the current study):

(2) Example LRE: resolved: targetlike

1. Male learner:	And where is for example the blender?
2. Female learner:	What's that thing?
3. Male learner:	The thing you use to chock the fruit and make eh…
4. Female learner:	Ah! Yes, yes!

In example 2 above learners discuss the meaning of the word "blender" while doing the Picture Placement task.

(3) Example LRE: not resolved

1. Female learner:	Oh! Ah, no? Mine's, I don't know if it's a ball or a racquet…?
2. Male learner:	No.
3. Female learner:	Eh…Like to round and round and round all the time.
4. Male learner:	Yeah, no.
5. Female learner:	No? So, I've one machine of that here in the park.
6. Male learner:	Ok.
7. Female learner:	I don't know the name.

In the example above they discuss the word for "wheel". The female learner does not know the correct English word for it and asks her partner. However he does not solve her doubt and the LRE remains unresolved.

(4) Example LRE: resolved: non-targetlike

1. Female learner 1:	He's packing his luggage?
2. Female learner 2:	How do you write that?
3. Female learner 1:	Luggage? Like L-U-G-A-G-E.
4. Female learner 2:	A…A…
5. Female learner 1:	…G-A-G-E.
6. Female learner 2:	E?
7. Female learner 1:	L-U-G-A…
8. Female learner 2:	Lugaje [luγαxe] […]

In this case, the LRE is resolved. Female learner 2 asks for the correct spelling of "luggage", her partner resolves her doubt but in an incorrect way. This LRE is resolved in a non-targetlike manner.

4 Results and discussion

This section presents the findings of the data analysis we have conducted on the basis of the LREs produced by the different dyads. We will present the findings following the order of the three research questions posited above, which are repeated here for the reader's convenience:

  i. Does type of dyad (male-male (MM), female-female (FF), male-female (MF)) influence the incidence of language related episodes (LRE) when pairs are working on specific tasks?
 ii. How does the type of task used in conversational interaction influence the learner's production of LREs? Do information-gap tasks (picture placement and picture description) generate more LREs than collaborative tasks (picture story and dictogloss)?
iii. If LREs are generated, are they resolved or unresolved?

The first research question focused on the potential differences in the incidence of LREs across the different dyads. The repeated-measures ANOVA shows that there is no significant group effect ($F = 0.25$, $p = 0.787$), that is, there is no significant difference between the LREs generated by matched (FF, MM) and mixed (MF) gender dyads. These results are in line with those reported by Ross-Feldman, who showed that the incidence of LREs across dyad type in each task was uniform, with the exception of the picture story task, in which MM dyads engaged in fewer LREs. Except for that case, type of dyad was not found to be significant.
The second research question focused on the influence of task type on the learners' production of LREs. The statistical analysis carried out shows that there is a significant task effect ($F = 4.90$, $p = 0.008$). This means that

the differences in the production of LREs are task-dependent (García Mayo, 2002a, 2002b; Gass, Mackey and Ross-Feldman, 2005; Williams, 1999). There is also a significant Group x Task interaction effect (F = 2.99, p = 0.023), that is, different tasks are carried out differently depending on the dyads (FF, MM or MF). Figure 2 features the incidence of LREs in each task and each type of dyad:
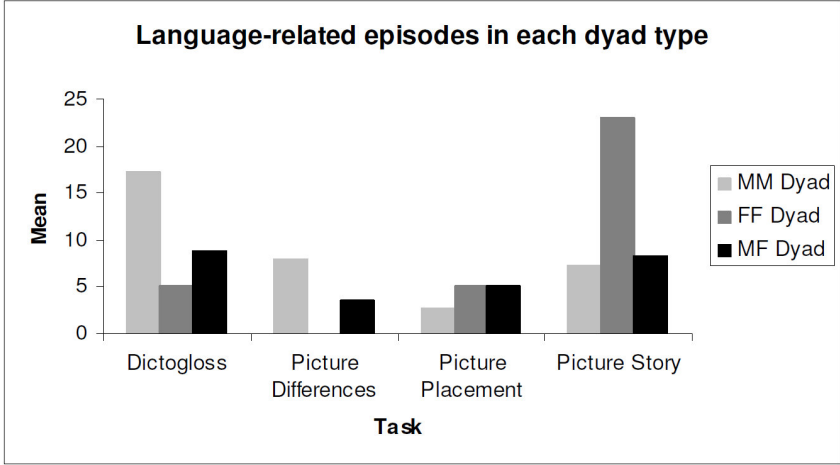

Figure 2: Language-related episodes per dyad

LREs were more common in the dictogloss (33.43%) and the picture story task (39.28%) as compared to the picture differences (12.54%) and the picture placement (14.76%) tasks. A plausible explanation for the difference between information-gap tasks (picture differences and picture placement) and collaborative tasks (dictogloss and picture story) could be based on the fact that both the dictogloss and the picture story task, involved not just conversational interaction with a specific goal (to complete the task) but also the production of a written text co-constructed by the two members of the dyad. In line with the findings in the study by Ross-Feldman (2007) and also in more recent work by Adams and Ross-Feldman (2008), the results of our study also point to the idea that tasks that include a writing component can push students to focus more on formal linguistic aspects during language production.

Ross-Feldman (2007) also reported that the tasks learners were engaged in seemed to have an effect on the incidence of LREs. Task was also a significant factor in her study, that is, there were significantly different proportions of LREs on different tasks: participants engaged in LREs most often on the picture story task, followed by the picture placement task and the picture differences task. The following figure represents the results reported on in Ross-Feldman (2007):
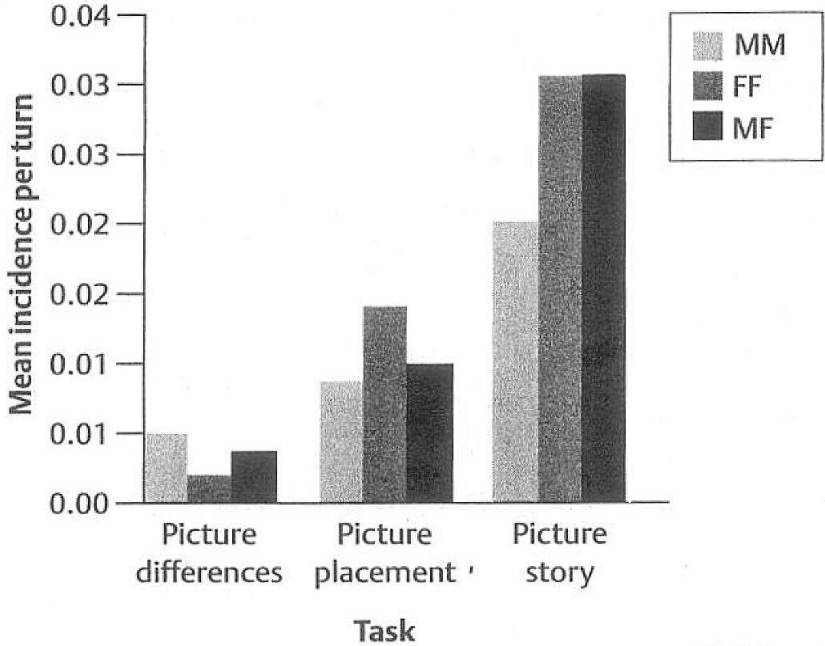
Figure 3: Language-related episodes in each dyad type in Ross-Feldman (2007)

The third research question focused on the resolution of LREs. We were interested in seeing whether those LREs produced were resolved or not and whether, if resolved, they were target-like. The overall finding is that most LREs were resolved in a target-like manner (77.72% targetlike, 7.52% non-targetlike and 14.76 not resolved). Figure 4 features the outcome of LREs resolution for each dyad and task type:
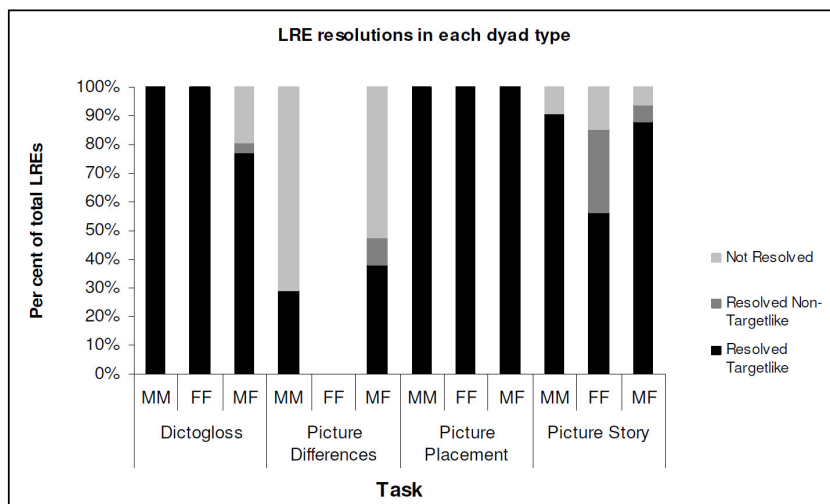

Figure 4: Language Related Episode resolutions in each dyad type

In what follows, we provide a description of the results obtained for each of the task types:
In the dictogloss all LREs were resolved correctly by matched-gender dyads (FF, MM dyads). In mixed-gender dyads (MF dyads), even if the majority of LREs were correct resolved (77.35%), a 18.87% of LREs was not resolved and a 3.78% was resolved but not in a targetlike manner.
In the picture placement task all LREs were resolved in a targetlike manner. In the picture differences task, there were no LREs in FF dyads. Moreover, most of the LREs were not resolved (70.84% in MM dyads and 52.38% in mixed-gender dyads) and very few were resolved in a targetlike manner (29.16% in MM dyads and 38.09% in mixed-gender dyads), a 9.53% was resolved in a non-targetlike way in MF dyads.
In the picture story task, in FF dyads 85.5% of the LREs were resolved (56.52% targetlike, 28.98% non-targetlike); 14.59% of the LREs were not resolved. In the case of MM dyads, almost all the LREs were resolved (90.95%), however 9.09% were not resolved. In mixed gender dyads (MF dyads), LREs were mostly resolved (88% in a targetlike manner and 6% in a non-targetlike manner), only 6% remained unresolved.
What these results suggest is that LREs that arose in the picture differences task seemed to be more difficult to resolve than in the other tasks. As can be seen, the majority of LREs was not resolved in this task in MM and MF dyads (LREs were not produced in FF dyads). We might speculate that it was the task-related vocabulary participants had to use in the park and beach scenes the one that caused problems, since participants were not familiar with some items they had to identify.
In MM dyads, except for the picture differences task, the majority of LREs was correctly resolved. In FF dyads, the majority of the LREs was resolved, however no LREs appeared in the picture differences tasks in this type of dyad, and in the picture story task, even if most of the LREs were resolved, a very high percentage of them was resolved in a non-targetlike manner.
In MF dyads, there is more heterogeneity in the resolution of LREs. In the dictogloss task, the picture story task and the picture placement task, LREs were mostly resolved in a targetlike manner. However, this type of dyad seems to have more difficulties with the LREs that arose during the picture differences task, since LREs were not resolved. These results are different from those obtained by Ross-Feldman (2007) as Figure 5 illustrates:
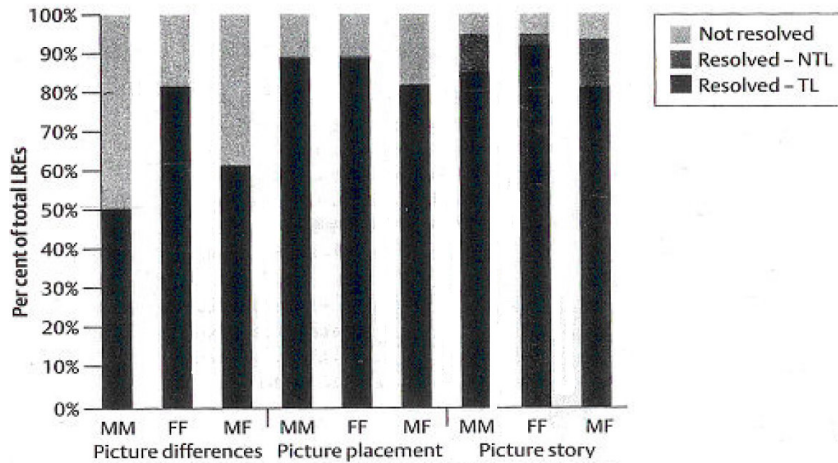
Figure 5: LRE resolution in each dyad type in Ross-Feldman (2007)

In order to provide a more complete picture of the findings obtained in Ross-Feldman's study and the present one, the following tables feature descriptive percentages of the results obtained in the three tasks that were used in both studies (picture description, picture placement and picture story). No statistical analysis could be carried out because we have had no access to the raw data in Ross-Feldman's study:

	THIS STUDY			ROSS-FELDMAN'S		
	MM dyads	FF dyads	MF dyads	MM dyads	FF dyads	MF dyads
Resolved Targetlike	29.16	0	38.09	50	81	60
Resolved Non-Targetlike	0	0	9,53	0	0	0
Unresolved	70.84	0	52.38	50	19	40

Table 2: Picture Differences task

It is interesting to see that the FF in our study did not produce LREs. The percentage of the LREs that remained unresolved in our study was very high (70.84% and 52.38% in MM dyads and MF dyads, respectively). In Ross-Feldman's study the percentages were lower (50%, 19% and 40% in MM, FF and MF dyads, respectively).

	THIS STUDY			ROSS-FELDMAN'S		
	MM dyads	FF dyads	MF dyads	MM dyads	FF dyads	MF dyads
Resolved Targetlike	100	100	100	89	89	82
Resolved Non-Targetlike	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unresolved	0	0	0	11	11	18

Table 3: Picture Placement task

In our study, all of the LREs were resolved in a targetlike manner in matched and mixed gender dyads. In the case of Ross-Feldman's study, even if the majority of LREs was resolved in a targetlike manner, a small percentage of them was not resolved (11%, 11% and 18% in MM, FF and MF dyads respectively).

	THIS STUDY			ROSS-FELDMAN'S		
	MM dyads	FF dyads	MF dyads	MM dyads	FF dyads	MF dyads
Resolved	90.95	56.52	88	84	91	82

Targetlike						
Resolved Non-Targetlike	0	28.98	6	11	4	14
Unresolved	9.05	14.5	6	5	5	4

Table 4: Picture Story task

The percentage of LREs resolved in a targetlike manner in MM and MF dyads was very similar, except for FF dyads (56.52% in our study and 91% in Ross-Feldman's study).
FF dyads are different in both studies. In Ross-Feldman the three groups (MM, FF and MF) behave in a very similar way, whereas in our study FF dyads do not behave as MM and MF dyads do. Even if the percentage of LREs resolved is high (85.5%), it has to be taken into account that 28.98% of them was resolved in a non-targetlike manner.
On the basis of the resolution of LREs, both groups behave differently: the group in our study seems to be more heterogeneous, in the sense that in some tasks their resolution is complete and correct while in others there are no LREs or the resolution of LREs is incorrect or not carried out at all, as is the case in the picture differences or picture story tasks. In Ross Feldman's study these LREs were resolved in a targetlike manner most of the time, except for the Picture Differences task, in which the resolution of LREs was not as high as in the other tasks. Even though there are some differences between this study and Ross-Feldman's, we can also find some similarities. In both cases it seems that there is no significant difference between LREs generated by matched and mixed-gender dyads, while the differences in the production of LREs are task-dependent. In Ross-Feldman's study the interaction between type of dyad and type of task was not significant, while in our case it is, meaning that tasks are carried out differently depending on whether dyads are matched or mixed.
The main finding in Ross-Feldman's study is that both males and females seem to be advantaged by working with female learners. In our study this is not the case, since participants seem to be more advantaged when they worked in matched-gender dyads than in mixed-gender dyads. One might speculate that the preference for matched-gender partners when carrying out tasks could be due to current methodological practice in most primary and secondary EFL classrooms, where teachers normally give the opportunity to choose partners and do not impose mixed dyads. Children prefer to work with someone of their same gender when they are asked to carry out a task in pairs.
It is also interesting to see our participants' opinion, since, as mentioned above; they completed a questionnaire after finishing the experiment. Even though in the present study we have not analyzed the qualitative data coming from their responses, they seem to point to the idea that half of the participants preferred to work with a female (6 participants); two of them (2) preferred to work with a male and the rest (4) had no problem working either with a female or a male. There seems to be some mismatch between the participants' responses, where they show preference for female partners, and the quantitative results, which reveal that they do better in matched-gender dyads.

5 Conclusion

This study set out to investigate whether gender could influence conversational interaction and whether different communicative tasks could have an impact on the type conversational interaction matched (male-male, female-female) and mixed (male-female) gender dyads engaged in. Gender is one of the least studied variables in SLA but it might be particularly relevant in studies conducted within the interactionist approach, which argues that conversational interaction can facilitate SLA by providing learners with opportunities to receive input, produce output and be offered appropriate feedback.
Inspired by recent work by Ross-Feldman (2007) with learners from a very different sociological background – learners from El Salvador learning English in an ESL context-, we conducted a study with 12 Basque-Spanish intermediate learners of English in an EFL context. The different dyads carried out four tasks, two information-gap tasks (picture description and picture placement) and two collaborative tasks (dictogloss and picture story). Task performance was operationalized in terms of language-related episodes (LREs) as they had been shown to be a site where L2 development might occur (Swain and Lapkin, 1998, 2001). On the basis of previous research on issues related to gender and task types, we entertained three research questions. In the first one we asked about whether the type of dyad could influence the incidence of LREs and we found that, in line with Ross-Feldman, there was no significant difference between the LREs generated by matched (female-female, male-male) and mixed (male-female) gender dyads.
In our second research question we asked about how task type could influence the learners' production of LREs and we found that, also in line with Ross-Feldman, the differences in the production of LREs were task-

dependent and that different tasks were carried out differently depending on the dyads (female-female, male-male or female-male).

In our third research question we focused on the resolution of LREs and we found that most LREs were resolved in a target-like manner, also along the lines of the results obtained by Ross-Feldman.

We should not conclude this study without making reference to the shortcomings that it does have. On the one hand, this could be considered a pilot study on the general issue of gender and interaction because of the small number of participants that took part in it. Further studies need to be carried out with a more robust sample in order for the general findings in this study to be supported. Data obtained in interaction-based work needs to be transcribed and codified and, even though we only had 6 dyads, their interaction amounted to almost 5 hours, which could be analyzed with other research questions in mind.

Thus, we need to collect data controlling some important individual variables and future work needs to consider learner's motivation (Dörnyei, 2009). For example, work by Dörnyei and Kormos (2000) has suggested that learners were more willing to communicate if they had a positive attitude towards the task they are engaged in and the same researchers have also claimed that the motivation of the interlocutor might also play a role in learning. Recent reviews on the interaction approach (García Mayo and Alcón, 2012) indicate that interaction research is currently considering individual variables (attention, working memory capacity, motivation) but there is clearly room for much more detailed research in this area. Tragant (2006) has produced a questionnaire that classifies learners on the basis of motivational factors. We intend to use it in future work as it is clear that motivation is a variable that needs to be controlled for when carrying out task-based interaction.

In conclusion, this study has shown that (i) type of dyad (male-male (MM), female-female (FF), male-female (MF)) does not influence the incidence of LREs when pairs are working on specific tasks, (ii) different tasks used in conversational interaction influence the learner's production of LREs (with those containing a written requirement generating a higher number of LREs), and (iii) most LREs were resolved in a target-like manner. All these findings will have to be further researched with a more robust number of participants, whose motivation will have to be measured with appropriate tools in order to establish appropriate motivation-matched dyads.

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