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## Teacher mediation in L2 classroom task-based interaction

### Abstract

Guided by the holistic view of the sociocultural theory towards learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Compernelle, 2015) and focusing on teacher assistance to learners' process of working through tasks (van Gorp & Van den Branden, 2015), the current study investigated teacher task-related assistance and language mediation, and how language mediation is adjusted according to learner's responsivity in classroom interaction. Sixteen Chinese learners of English residing in Canada carried out meaning-focused tasks in an intact classroom, taught by an experienced teacher over a four-week period. Approximately 12 hours of audio-recorded classroom interactions were transcribed and analysed qualitatively using microanalysis method to examine characteristics of teacher task-related and language mediation. The results indicate that the teacher provided both task-related assistance, which addressed different task issues (e.g., task clarification, modeling, eliciting, and direction), and language mediation that featured diverse characteristics and varying degree of collaboration, which led us to identify two levels of mediation: low and highly collaborative. These results are discussed in terms of the role of teacher task-related assistance and language mediation on assisting and mediating learner's appropriation of language form and process of working through tasks.

*Key words:* teacher mediation, ZPD, classroom interaction, recast, mediation

## Teacher mediation in L2 classroom task-based interaction

### **Introduction**

In language classrooms, meaning-focused tasks are often introduced as a primary means for promoting second language (L2) learning (Crookes & Gass, 1993; Long, 2014; Robinson, 2011). Apart from focusing on tasks, previous research has investigated teacher assistance primarily in the form of various types of feedback during interaction (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001; Lyster & Ranta 1997; Loewen & Philp, 2006). However, simply documenting teacher's assistance to learners in terms of instances and types of feedback does not capture a comprehensive picture of how teachers actually assist learners in the course of interacting towards task goals (Philp, 2016; Samuda, 2001; van Gorp & Van den Branden, 2015).

According to the holistic view of the sociocultural theory towards language learning that takes all individuals and social environmental factors into consideration, teacher's assistance including both assistance on language and task-related issues, supports learners to complete a particular activity (Platt & Brooks, 2002; van Compernelle, 2015). In language learning activities, teacher's task assistance and language mediation could occur in every step of the task activity. As a complement to previous research on tasks within the sociocultural theory, this study aims to explore how teachers assist and mediate learners in task-based activities, and how task-related assistance and language mediation together assist learners in the process of working through tasks. The next sections will discuss teacher's task-related assistance and language mediation in task-based interaction.

### **Teacher's task-related assistance**

Teacher's task-related assistance refers to assistance that addresses task issues other than language such as clarification of task instruction, procedure, execution, task modeling. Excerpt 1 illustrates an instance of task-related assistance in which learners had difficulty starting the activity (Platt & Brooks, 2002, p. 377).

### Excerpt 1: Difficulty getting the activity started

In Excerpt 1, participants' difficulty getting the activity started is evidenced through their

- 1 E: ok [*returns & gives pencils*] thank you very much for participating and I'm  
just gonna be here manning the camera [*pause of 54 seconds begins*]
- 2 C: [*looks up and smiles at T; gestures for her to begin, palm up and moving  
toward her*]
- 3 T: [*scratches head, looks at map*]
- 4 C: [*puts hand to face, fist over mouth*]
- 5 T: [*puts pencil in her mouth*]
- 6 C: [*puts pencil beside his mouth*]
- 7 T: [*moves pencil around*]
- 8 E: Nobody's talking [*laughs nervously*]
- 9 T: [*looks at C*]
- 10 E: Ok you can ask each other [*silence continues 10 seconds*]
- 11 T: [*scratches her head, throws her hand into the air, and looks at C with a  
disgusted "this is ridiculous, what are we supposed to do?" look*]

silence, gesture and facial expressions (lines 2-7). The elapsed time of difficulty was then broken by the teacher researcher's (E) intervening turn *nobody's talking* (line 8) and a brief suggestion *ok you can ask each other* (line 10). Participants' difficulty was partly attributed to their unfamiliarity with the activity type and lack of strategies for executing the activity (Platt & Brooks, 2002). In sum, Excerpt 1 showed that those task-related difficulties are likely to occur in task-based interaction.

The occurrence of task-related issues as seen in Excerpt 1 also indicates that it is not always the case that learners would understand how to carry out the task after receiving instructions. Thus, when learners do not understand or misunderstand what they are required to do to complete the task, providing just language input may not produce useful results. For

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that reason, task-related assistance which receives less attention in previous L2 research needs to be brought to the forefront along with teacher assistance that concerns language problems (i.e., language mediation). Additionally, given that both task-related and language assistance would help learners to engage in a task, what has not been much investigated in previous research within sociocultural perspective is how the teacher's task-related assistance and language mediation go hand in hand to assist learners in co-constructing L2 knowledge during the course of completing tasks. This points to the importance of looking at both teacher task-related assistance and language mediation in order to explore how they together help the learners co-construct L2 knowledge during interaction, which may potentially lead to L2 development.

### **Teacher's language mediation**

As discussed earlier, teachers provide language mediation that helps learners to internalize mediational means (e.g., L2 concepts and meanings) during task activities. Teacher language mediation refers to assistance that addresses learners' language problems. The sociocultural approach conceptualizes mediation as various forms of assistance provided to help learners appropriate psychological tools such as language forms, patterns of language use and meanings that are then used independently to regulate their mental activity during task performance (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Compernelle, 2015). Teacher mediation is perceived to help learners develop a better understanding on the way to appropriation of language forms (Lantolf & Thorn, 2006; Wertsch, 1998). Additionally, teacher mediation not only supports learners to work towards task completion but also scaffolds and responds to their needs in the interaction of "working collaboratively through tasks" (Poehner & van Compernelle, 2011, p. 191).

The sociocultural theory considers language learning as a socially situated and collaboratively co-constructed activity, taking all actions in interaction into consideration

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during the process of language knowledge construction (Donato, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne 2006; Ohta, 2001). It specifically highlights co-construction of knowledge through collaboration and mutual assistance from all participants (e.g., teacher and learners) in enabling learners to achieve what they cannot attain individually. L2 development in the sociocultural theory, therefore, refers to a qualitative transformation of psychological functioning resulting from the internalization of mediational tools, which enables learners to manipulate semiotic artifacts to perform their intended communication (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Compernelle, 2015; Zinchenko, 2002). In language classrooms, teacher language mediation is believed to enable learners to appropriate language forms for communication and transform communicative capacities and mental functioning as a result of a process of obtaining control over psychological tools such as language forms, patterns of language use and meanings (Lantolf, 2012).

Within the sociocultural approach that views task-based interaction as a site for L2 knowledge co-construction through mediation (Gutiérrez, 2008; Ohta, 2001), teacher assistance that addresses language issues is perceived as language mediation that stimulates learners' self-regulation and joint construction of knowledge to arise during interaction (see Rassaei, 2014; van Compernelle, 2015), and this mediation is attuned to learners' potential level of development (Vygotsky, 1986). Following this perspective, Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) suggest that teacher mediation needs to be graduated, contingent and dialogic. The graduated mediation refers to teacher's adjustment of mediation according to learners' potential level of development, as reflected in their responsiveness during a process of appropriating psychological tools, which is believed to create a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD, a distance between the actual and potential level of development (Vygotsky, 1986), is created collaboratively by learners and teacher in classroom interaction through the process of co-regulation and/or internalization of mediational means.

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Additionally, to be tailored to learners' ZPD teacher mediation needs to be dialogic with collaboration between learners and teacher, and contingent (i.e., assistance offered only when needed and withdrawn when learners can function independently). Teacher's graduated, dialogic and contingent mediation (i.e., ZPD mediation) is conceived of an assisted force that drives learners to develop what is maturing.

Previous research guided by the sociocultural theory has shown that teacher language mediation is most effective when it is sensitive to learners' ZPD (Nassaji & Swain, 2000). For example, ZPD language mediation was shown to enable learners to shift from other-regulation (i.e., identify errors with assistance) to self-regulation of language forms (i.e., self-identify errors with minimal or without help) both within and across interactions (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). Specifically, while some learners needed more explicit help to identify errors, others were able to do so just with minimal implicit help. In addition, teacher's help that geared to learners' ZPD (e.g., scaffolded or graduated feedback) was more effective than recast (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Rassaei, 2014), explicit feedback (Erlam, Ellis & Batstone, 2013), or feedback that was provided randomly (Nassaji & Swain, 2000). Overall, teacher language mediation that is aligned with learners' ZPD has been shown to enable learners to move from other-regulation to self-regulation as indicated by more successful identification of errors, more accurate use of language forms, and more frequent self-correction.

Although teacher's graduated mediation has been explored (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994), little research has reported how the teacher language mediation is adjusted according to learner's responsiveness. Understanding this 'online' adjustment of teacher language mediation (i.e., immediate adjustment) in oral task-based interaction could shed more light on its contribution to learners' onsite co-construction of language knowledge. In addition, since the nature of teacher language mediation may change depending on learners' responsiveness (Donato, 1994; Poehner, 2008; Swain, 2000), looking at its characteristics can gain more

insights into why and/or how it works in helping learners to appropriate L2 forms and meanings.

### **Purpose of the study**

Although previous research has investigated the role of language mediation in L2 development (Nassaji & Swain, 2000; Rassaei, 2014), little is known about characteristics of teacher task assistance and language mediation and how they are tuned according to learner's responsivity during interaction. In classroom contexts, teachers may provide different types of assistance and mediation (van Gorp & van den Branden, 2015), which highlights the importance of investigating, not only the teacher's language mediation, but also the teacher's task-related assistance, an area that received less attention in previous sociocultural research. In addition, because the effectiveness of teacher assistance on learners' language problems may depend on how the mediation is offered and tailored to learners' ZPD, examining its characteristics with regard to teacher's adjustment of mediation may shed more light on the issue. Taken together, to investigate the characteristics of teacher task-related assistance and language mediation in task-based activities, one research question was formulated: What are characteristics of teacher task-related assistance and language mediation in oral task-based activities?

## **Method**

### **The data**

Data reported for the study was taken from a large research project, investigating input frequency, formulaicity and acquisition of past-tense morphology (Gatbonton, Segalowitz, & Yanchak, 2011). Participants were 32 Chinese learners of English ( $M_{age} = 28.5$ ,  $SD = 6.2$  years), residing in Canada for an average of 1.15 years ( $SD = .92$ ), with four participants enrolled in a university degree program and the rest working and seeking jobs. They formed two classes that met weekly for two hours over a four-week period. The participants reported to have



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learned English at high schools and universities in China. Teachers' observation indicated that the participants were of intermediate proficiency level, and could understand contextual English very well. The two teachers were an English native speaker and a highly proficient English L2 speaker, who both hold a master's degree in Applied Linguistics and had extensive teaching experience. Both teachers followed the same syllabus and used the same tasks over the period. Classroom interactions were audio-recorded using digital audio-recorders. Although video recordings would provide more information into learners and teachers' non-verbal moves, audio-recorders were used since participants consented to being audio-recorded only. Approximately 12 hours of audio-recorded classroom interactions from one class ( $n=16$ ) was reported in this study.

### **The tasks**

The study used eleven tasks, with some adapted from the textbook *The bridge to fluency, Speaking 1* (Gatbonton, 1991). They included (1) last weekend activities, (2) picture narrative, (3) alibi creation, (4) alibi interrogations, (5) false statement guessing, (6) domino-effect narrative, (7) picture description of accidents, (8) accident report, (9) story sharing, (10) strange actions, and (11) excuses. Task topics concerned learners' routine activities such as last-week activities, past experience, work, and study. Learners carried out the tasks in pairs, small groups, and learner-led whole class groups. Despite differences in characteristics (e.g., group size, topics and task features), these tasks were designed to promote learners' production of past tense verbs. Some tasks were also designed to elicit repetitive use of past tense verbs with the aim of enhancing learner automatization (see Authors, XXXX; Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005).

### **Analysis**

Audio-recorded interactions were transcribed using transcription conventions adapted from previous research (Authors, XXXX, see Appendix). Talk segments where the teacher

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provides task assistance and language mediation were qualitatively identified following microanalysis method that focuses on analyzing utterance by utterance (Brooks, Donato & McGlone, 1997; Guitiérrez, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). Specifically, the data were examined in terms of what the teacher and learners appear to be doing on the utterance-by-utterance basis in each mediation sequence (van Compernelle, 2015, 2016; also see Bakhtin, 1981); in other words, detailed turn-by-turn discourse analysis was conducted through describing each interactional move in each utterance in relation to previous and subsequent utterances or turns. This approach captures the ‘what happened before and what happened next’ (van Compernelle, 2016, p. 176) in order to understand the functional purpose of each interactional move in the course of interaction; that is, how each participant (the learners and the teacher) interpretes the purpose of the previous turn and how he/she responds in the subsequent turn.

## Results

To address the research question that investigated the characteristics of teacher task-related assistance and language mediation, the qualitative analysis of classroom interaction was conducted. The results showed that the teacher provided different types of task-related assistance and language mediation to enable learners to work through the tasks and help to appropriate language forms.

### Task-related assistance

With regard to task-related assistance that helps learners to resolve task issues (e.g., clarification of task instruction, procedure, execution, task modeling or guidance), Excerpt 2 extracted from Task 1 *Last weekend activities* at three different points of time in interaction illustrates this task-related assistance.

Excerpt 2. Task-related assistance: Task clarification and confirmation

1 S1: Do we ask every people?

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2 T: Yes try to talk to different people ...don't just turn to your friend and say ok?

Try to meet different people ok?

....

3 S2: If nobody went out of town this weekend?

4 T: If nobody then it will be blank that's too bad

....

5 S3: And uh those questions only for this weekend?

6 T: Just for this weekend only for this weekend Saturday Sunday

In Excerpt 2, while asking each other's last weekend activities, learners turned to confirm and clarify task instructions with the teacher (lines 1, 3, and 5). In response to learners' queries, the teacher provided a suggestion (line 2), explanation (line 4) and additional information (line 6). Excerpt 2 demonstrates three aspects of task execution under assistance: task procedures (lines 1–2), task guidance (lines 3–4) and confirmation of task instructions (lines 5–6). What is important in Excerpt 2 is that the teacher assistance addresses different issues of task execution, which likely help avoid learners' possible difficulties carrying out the tasks as seen in Excerpt 1. Excerpt 3 from Task 4 *Alibi interrogations* illustrates another instance of task-related assistance that directs learners to continue the task.

Excerpt 3. Task-related assistance: Directing learners

1 S1: Lady a great lady uh uh...

2 T: Ok About dinner? Ask her questions about the dinner

3 S1: How much did [*unintelligible*] cost for dinner?

4 S2: Ah you know Chinese buffet is very cheap ah it's about ah um...8 or uh--

5 S1: --eight dollar per person?

6 S3: Add the...add the \*teeps [*tips*] and uh [*unintelligible*] the tax that's all

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- 7 S1: Uh how much...uh do you pay—did you pay?
- 8 S2: You know ah we just uh use our Visa card so [*laughter*]
- 9 S1: How many tip...how many tips did you give?
- 10 S2: Actually we should pay about uh 10% or uh 15%

In Excerpt 3, as the learner remained silent without asking further questions (line 1) during the interrogation, the teacher prompted ideas *ask her questions about the dinner* (line 2). This intervenining turn helped the learners generate many subsequent questions related to *dinner* (lines 3, 5, 7 and 9). Excerpt 3 showed that teacher task-related assistance in the form of a prompt encouraged learners' contribution to the interaction, resolved the task problem (e.g., breaking silence), and helped continue the task (see Koshik, 2002). Excerpt 4 extracted from Task 2 *Picture narrative* also illustrates teacher task-related assistance regarding task modeling and eliciting.

Excerpt 4. Task-related assistance: Modeling and eliciting

In Excerpt 4, after a long pause, the teacher elicited ideas (line 1), which led to the learner's

- 1 T: Here what more information could you get?
- 2 S1: When did you take a bath?
- 3 T: Yes well maybe with whom did you take a bath? Where did you take a bath?
- 4 S1: %What time%?
- 5 S2: %What time%?
- 6 T: Ok what time did you take a bath?
- 7 S3: How long did you [*laughs*]?
- 8 S2: How many times?

initiation of a question (line 2). Then, the teacher modeled with example questions (line 3).

This task-related assistance appeared to enable learners to proceed further in the task because learners generated many different questions subsequently (lines 2, 4, 5, 7 and 8). In sum, the

instances of task-related assistance above demonstrated that the teacher provided assistance that addressed diverse task issues in interaction.

### Language mediation

Apart from task-related assistance, the teacher provided language mediation that helped learners appropriate L2 concepts and meanings. In terms of characteristics, one type of language mediation exhibits a high degree of collaboration and in-depth discussion of language forms (e.g., elaboration, joint-efforts, numerous attempts, mutuality and reciprocity) as demonstrated in numerous exchanges of turns and support among participants. Thus, this type of language mediation was labeled as highly collaborative language mediation. Excerpt 5 from Task 2 *Picture narrative* illustrates this highly collaborative language mediation regarding discussion and clarification of difference in meaning between two phrasal verbs: *put on* and *try on*. In this excerpt, the learners were describing a man putting on his clothes. Excerpt 5. Highly collaborative language mediation in resolving misuse of phrasal verbs

- 1 S1: uh... try on clothes
- 2 T: Did he try on clothes? [*prosodic stress on 'try'*]
- 3 S2: No put on
- 4 S3: %put on%
- 5 S1: %put on%
- 6 T: He put on his clothes uh what what's the difference between try on and put on?
- 7 S2: Try on means the...uh--
- 8 S4: --try on is when you buy something
- 9 T: Where do you try on clothes?
- 10 S2: In a shop uh--

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- 11 S3: --when you want to buy a new clothes
- 12 S2: In a store--
- 13 S4: --when you buy new clothes.
- 14 T: You're looking to see if they're ok or maybe if you know you have your fat clothes and your skinny clothes and try on some clothes to make sure they fit uh ok so he put on his clothes then what did he do?
- 15 S4: He uh go uh...

In Excerpt 5, when describing pictures, Student 1 misused the verb phrases *try on* and *put on*. Due to an incorrect use of the phrase *try on* in describing a man putting on clothes (line 1), the teacher opened a learning opportunity for learners by asking a question repeating the student's words with a prosodic stress on the trouble source—*try on* (line 2). This mediation appeared to help Student 2 understand her partner's misuse of the phrase, and thus she resolved the issue by using a correct substitute *put on* (line 3). The replacement of *try on* by *put on* also showed to help Students 1 and 3 understand the items as reflected in their repetition of the correct form (lines 4–5). To contribute to help the learners gain further understanding of the items, the teacher requested explicit clarification (line 6) to differentiate the meaning of the two lexical items. Student 2 who provided the answer previously attempted to answer but paused (line 7). Student 3 helped by providing an explanation (line 8). The answer did not seem sufficient and clear enough to understand the meaning of the items. Consequently, the teacher created another learning opportunity by eliciting further explanation (line 9), which led Student 2 to provide additional information to explain the meaning of *try on* (line 10). Students 3 and 4 also showed to collaborate with Student 2 by continuing each other's utterances (lines 11–13). At the end of the episode (line 14), the teacher offered explicit

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information in addition to students' explanation to clarify the difference between the two phrasal verbs.

In light of Aljaafreh and Lantolf 's (1994) conceptualization of ZPD, teacher language mediation in Excerpt 5 is interpreted as ZPD language mediation. First, it was provided through a dialogic segment of interaction where the teacher and students collaborated effectively in solving a language problem and co-constructed L2 lexical knowledge. Second, it responded to learners' language difficulty (i.e., inaccurate word choice). Third, it appeared to be implicit at first, in the form of prompt–repetition of learner's utterance with a prosodic stress on the trouble source (line 2), and became more explicit at the later stages as exemplified in clarification request (lines 6, 9) and explicit explanation (line 14). Fourth, it was withdrawn when learners could proceed with the task, as reflected in *ok so he put on clothes then what did he do next* (line 14). It should be noted that ZPD language mediation in Excerpt 5 consists of many mediation moves in the form of prompts, as identified by Lyster and Ranta (1997), e.g., repetition (line 2), clarification request (line 6), and elicitation (line 9). However, these prompts function together as a whole, rather than separately, to address one lexical problem.

Excerpt 5 also indicated the teacher's effort to create additional mediated learning opportunity and co-regulation among interactants in the process of appropriating language forms and meanings (van Compernelle, 2015). For instance, the learners' inaccurate word choice regulated what the teacher did, i.e., indicate the error (line 2), which in turn regulated the learners' interaction, i.e., respond to the questions (lines 3, 4 and 5). The co-regulation also occurred among learners as reflected in the subsequent turns, in which they completed each other's utterances to explain the meaning of *try on*, which then regulated the teachers' subsequent questions and follow-up mediation (i.e., explicit gloss of *try on*). Additionally, the teacher's intervention to probe learners' understanding of the lexical items even when the

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response was appropriate (line 3) appeared to create more learning opportunities for them to internalize the meanings.

Furthermore, highly collaborative language mediation featured the reciprocity and mutuality (see Damon & Phelps, 1989; Storch, 2002) among participants as reflected in Excerpt 6 (Task 2 *Picture narrative*). In this excerpt, the teacher language mediation was to help learners gain an understanding of the meanings of *bus stop* and *bus station*.

Excerpt 6. Highly collaborative language mediation in resolving confusion in meanings

- 1 S1: At the bus stop
- 2 S2: The bus station
- 3 S1: The bus stop
- 4 S2: Bus station bus stop it's different?
- 5 T: Yeah it's different what's the difference from the stop and station? Busstation  
bus stop what's the difference?
- 6 S3: Bus station is uh common
- 7 S4: Station a very big
- 8 T: How many buses? What do you need to have a bus station?
- 9 S1: Two
- 10 T: What is necessary for a bus station?
- 11 S4: For a long trip for a long trip
- 12 S3: Bus station is only two \*tomminull [*Terminal*]
- 13 T: A What? A long trip?
- 14 S4: Yes
- 15 T: Could be
- 16 S2: Uh



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17 S3: Uh...

18 S1: ...

19 T: ...A bus station you need some kind of building right? A bus stop it could be just a sign...here comes the bus you get on the bus there you go... a bus station is where buses come to leave and to go...they begin and end their journey at a bus station but a bus stop the bus just passes on by Ok? What happened next? number nine.

In Excerpt 6, the learners used two phrases *bus stop* and *bus station* to describe a scene at a bus station. When Student 1 used *bus stop* to describe a bus station, Student 2 replaced it with *bus station* (line 2) but Student 1 repeated *bus stop* (line 3). This led Student 2 to ask for help from the teacher (line 4). In these first four lines, the learners showed to regulate each other's turn, with Student 2 correcting the partner's error (line 2), and asking for teacher's help (line 4) after Student 1 repeated her original utterance. This created a learning space between learners about the items. Additionally, the question of Student 2 to the teacher (line 4) showed that she perceived teacher as a mediator for language support to fine-tune the interaction (i.e., appropriate word choice). This question also regulated what the teacher did subsequently. That is, the teacher asked for clarification between *bus stop* and *bus station* (line 5), which opened space for learners to understand the meanings of the two phrases. Students 3 and 4 also collaborated in resolving the issue by contributing to clarifying the differences between *bus stop* and *bus station* (lines 6 and 7). The answers of Students 3 and 4 then led to the teacher's next question (line 8). Student 1 who misused the phrase earlier returned to answer the teacher's question (line 9), but the teacher continued asking a further question (line 10), which provided learners with more opportunities to respond. Students 3 and 4 who answered the teacher's previous question continued to contribute to the discussion by providing further

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answers (lines 11 and 12). After many turn-exchanges, the teacher helped to resolve the problem by providing a detailed explanation about the difference between two verbs.

Excerpt 6 revealed two major characteristics of interaction reciprocity. The first was the teacher's interpretation of learners' language behavior (i.e., 'online' or immediate assessment) in order to determine what would be the most appropriate mediation. This indicates that the teacher seemed to cater to learners' ZPD by eliciting information through questions (lines 5, 8, 10, 13) before offering an explicit mediation (line 19). The second was learners' exercise of self-regulation. Learners' confirmation with the teacher about the difference between *bus stop* and *bus station* indicates that they had some knowledge of the items (line 4) but were not fully in control, consequently requested a specific form of mediation. Similar to Excerpt 5, the reciprocity between participants in Excerpt 6 was projected in the teacher's questions and learners' contributing turns. For example, as the learners explained *station is very big* (line 7), the teacher followed up with the question *how many buses* (line 8) and requested further information *what is necessary for a bus station* (line 8). These interactive moves showed that what learners responded regulated the teacher's subsequent contribution to the interaction.

Furthermore, highly collaborative language mediation showed the joint effort between the learners and the teacher as reflected in the teacher's elaboration of language mediation according to learners' responsiveness (Excerpt 7, Task 5 *False statement guessing*). Excerpt 7 illustrated teacher language mediation in word search.

Excerpt 7. Highly collaborative language mediation in word search

- 1 S1: Investment invest uh immigrate
- 2 S2: Invest uh immigrate uh I don't know how to
- 3 S3: Yeah uh we should ask uh ask her

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- 4 S1: Excuse--
- 5 S3: --excuse me yeah I will ask you a word how to the the person who immigrate  
to Canada uh for invest uh investigate
- 6 S1: Investa
- 7 T: Investor?
- 8 S3: Yeah investor ah you know...
- 9 T: An investor class immigrant? To invest?
- 10 S3: Ah you know uh we come here as a new immigrate as a techno tehno
- 11 S1: Technology immigration
- 12 S3: Technology immigrate there's another kind of immigrate
- 13 T: Investor class they put money?
- 14 S3: Yeah what's the what's the name of?
- 15 S4: Uh she she put uh have to create one company in Canada
- 16 T: Yeah an investor class immigrant
- 17 S4: Crass [*wrong* pronunciation] investor crass
- 18 S1: Ah
- 19 S3: Ah investor
- 20 T: Yeah investor class immigrant

In Excerpt 7, when Students 1 and 2 encountered the lexical problem of *investor class immigrant* (line 1–2), Student 3 suggested asking for teacher's help (line 3) and thus asked the teacher a question (line 5). Before the teacher provided the mediation, Student 1 prompted *investa* (line 6), which not only showed her collaboration by correcting partner but also indicated that she had some knowledge of the item. Although the teacher provided the support (line 7), the learner negotiated for more appropriate mediation—*as you know* (lines 8). The

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teacher then elaborated her mediation as *an investor class immigrant* (line 9). To create space for learners' extended explanation and collaboration, the teacher asked whether her mediation was appropriate—*to invest?* (line 9). This led both students to specify the type of mediation they requested (lines 10–12). To open more opportunities for learner contribution, the teacher checked with further information—*investor class they put money?* (line 13). The learner agreed—*yeah* (line 14) and continued to provide additional information (lines 14–15). The negotiation finally resulted in the agreement among all participants (lines 16–20). What is important in the highly collaborative language mediation in Excerpt 7 is the teacher's several attempts to create learning opportunities and elaborate the mediation, which encouraged the learners to negotiate and contribute to resolving the problem. This consequently helped the learners appropriate the meaning of the item. This elaboration of mediation through negotiated interaction reflected *mediated joint activity* (van Compernelle, 2015) that helps the learners obtain the shared understanding of the symbolic artifacts (i.e., L2 word phrase—*investor class immigrant*) and reached intersubjectivity.

Overall, Excerpts 5, 6, and 7 showed that the teacher attempted to tailor to learner ZPDs by opening opportunities for knowledge co-construction of lexical items.

Simultaneously, this attempt also created more space for learner-learner collaboration, where the teacher was not the only one who created ZPDs for the learners; the learners also created ZPDs for their peers. This highlights the multiparty process of knowledge co-construction, where all participants regulate each other at the same time.

In contrast with highly collaborative language mediation, low collaborative language mediation that displays brief collaboration or little discussion of language forms between learners and teacher during the process of appropriating psychological tools was also observed. Excerpt 8, from Task 3 *Alibi creation*, illustrates two instances of teacher

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reformulation of learner's non-targetlike utterances (lines 1–2 and lines 5–6) where the learners discussed the activities to create an alibi.

Excerpt 8. Low collaborative mediation: recast

In Excerpt 8, as the learner produced a non-targetlike utterance (line 1), the teacher

- 1 S1: Four o'clock we are in the cinema
- 2 T: You were in the cinema ok what did you do in the morning?
- 3 S1: Uh in the morning we did exercises
- 4 T: Ah
- 5 S1: And uh go swimming
- 6 T: You went swimming ok
- 7 S1: for two hours

reformulated it (line 2), and immediately proceeded to the next question. This immediate reformulation did not give the learner an opportunity to collaborate and work through the problem. Thus, it did not seem to draw her attention to the inaccurate use of verb tense as she made a similar non-targetlike utterance in a subsequent turn (line 5). This non-targetlike utterance was then recasted by the teacher who also did not create a chance for the learner to uptake the recast as demonstrated in *ok* (line 6). As a result, the learner continued the task with new information to complete the task (line 7).

Different from Excerpt 8 where the teacher's word *ok* treats the issue as complete after recast, Excerpt 9 showed learners' immediate response to recast, i.e., uptake of recast (line 4).

Excerpt 9. Low collaborative mediation: recast

- 1 S1: Uh we go to library
- 2 T: We went to the library
- 3 S2: Uh YMCA [*library*]

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4 S1: We went to library yeah

Despite being brief as Excerpt 8 and 9 , Excerpt 10, from Task 4 *Alibi interrogation*, however, projected the teacher's attempt to elicit learners' self-correction.

Excerpt 10. Low collaborative mediation: Elicitation and recast

The teacher firstly provided a prompt (line 2) in response to the learner's non-targetlike

1 S1: Did you went to a restaurant?

2 T: Did you [*rising intonation*]

3 S1: Uh did you went

4 T: Did you go a restaurant? I went to a restaurant but did you go to a restaurant?

utterance, expecting the learner to correct the error. This pedagogical prompt is similar to what Koshik (2002) called as designedly incomplete utterance (DIU) since the teacher initiated an incomplete turn made up of learner's word and stopped right before the trouble source, prompting the learner to complete the turn through which error could be corrected. However, the learner repeated her previous non-targetlike utterance (line 3), which led the teacher to recast it (line 4).

Taken together, low collaborative mediation in Excerpt 8, 9 and 10, where the teacher immediately produced a next utterance after recast, clearly showed that opportunities for working through the language error were very brief. This recast mediation is often considered as less collaborative than scaffolded feedback—an example of highly collaborative language mediation where the teacher creates multiple opportunities for learners to work on the language (Rassaei, 2014). In addition, recast mediation demonstrates low degree of collaboration because it often consists of one interactional move such as recast move in response to previous utterances, which was likely followed by another interactional move such as uptake of recast (Loewen & Philp, 2006) as shown in Excerpt 9. The low collaborative language mediation in Excerpts 8, 9 and 10 suggested that teacher's recast seemed to pay little concern to learners' ZPD as indicated by teacher's immediate answer

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regardless of learners' ZPD. Given the sociocultural perspective that perceives interaction as a joint activity in which interaction mediates the collective actions of participants (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Compernelle, 2010), Excerpts 8, 9 and 10, however, appeared to demonstrate the less collaborative actions or joint effort between the teacher and the learners as compared to highly collaborative mediation in Excerpts 5, 6, and 7.

In summary, the results showed that teacher provided task-related assistance and language mediation during learners' interaction, with each type of assistance and mediation featuring diverse characteristics. The results are discussed in terms of the role of teacher task-related assistance and language mediation in assisting and mediating learners' appropriation of language form and process of working through tasks.

### **Discussion**

This exploratory study investigated teacher task-related assistance and language mediation that help learners work through tasks. The results showed that learners encountered different task execution problems during interactions, and thus requested teacher assistance. This task-related assistance seems significant to learners' completion of the task since it establishes the conditions for language development in task-based interaction (Platt & Brooks, 2002). For example, in Excerpt 2 learners confirmed how the tasks should be conducted, which indicates learners' care about how to carry out the task in an expected fashion. Although learners may approach and perform tasks differently (Coughlan & Duff, 1994), without teacher specific guidance the learners might carry out the task in a way that does not meet the teacher's instructional goals.

In addition, learners' task-related issues require different kinds of teacher's help as demonstrated in the characteristics of task-related assistance. For instance, task-related assistance showed potential for helping learners conduct tasks in a productive way and possibly avoid task difficulties which may halt task completion (Excerpt 2). Additionally, it

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could enable learners to continue the tasks through brief assistance (e.g., directing learners) and help them become engaged and productive as shown in their production of many subsequent turns (Excerpt 3). Moreover, teacher task-related assistance revealed the teachers' efforts to model and elicit learners' talk, which helps move the task forward (Excerpt 4). Overall, the excerpts illustrate how important task-related assistance is in driving learners to interact and fulfil the task requirement. It appears that documenting teacher task-related assistance has not been much emphasized in previous task-based research. Given the pedagogical goal that learners are often instructed to undertake tasks through which language knowledge is co-constructed, more attention should be allocated to this rarely reported area.

The data also indicated that the teacher provided both low and highly collaborative language mediation. As reported in the results section, all highly collaborative language mediation instances concerned lexical items. Since the tasks were meaning-focused, the learners were expected to communicate in meaning-focused tasks; therefore, their frequent requests for lexical mediation were not surprising. However, characteristics of these highly collaborative language mediation instances showed that the way the learners sought and reacted to the teacher's lexical mediation was relatively different among learners, which could represent learners' varying ZPDs, thus demonstrating different routes to appropriation of L2 meanings (Zhang & Lantolf, 2015). For instance, in Excerpt 6, the learners seemed to be aware of their language difficulty—the different meanings of two lexical items (i.e., *bus station* versus *bus stop*), so requested for teacher mediation. The resulting dialogue segment between the teacher and learners showed that the learners had limited knowledge of the items because they did not provide clear and appropriate explanation to the teacher's questions. However, in Excerpt 7 the learners that also asked for lexical mediation (i.e., *investor class immigrant*) showed a different pattern. They not only requested what they needed but also negotiated and required the teacher to elaborate on the mediation.



What is significant to learners' development shown in these highly collaborative mediation instances is the collaboration and reciprocity among participants. In highly collaborative mediation, there was greater reciprocity between participants (i.e., teacher and learners) in co-constructing knowledge as reflected in multiple turn exchanges (Rassaei, 2014). In addition, highly collaborative mediation showed how the teacher mediation was adjusted according to learners' responsivity. It was likely that this greater quantity and quality (i.e., mediation adjusted or elaborated based on learners' responsivity) of highly collaborative mediation led to learners' more successful self-regulation. In other words, highly collaborative mediation seems to create more opportunities for learners to co-construct their lexical knowledge.

Despite positive effects of teacher highly collaborative language mediation on L2 performance (Erlam, Ellis & Batstone, 2013; Nassaji & Swain, 2000; Rassaei, 2014), it should be pointed out that whether the learners in this study would retain and use these items autonomously later (i.e., internalize new psychological tools to execute new psychological functions) is not known since no measure was delivered to test this development. However, it appears that in highly collaborative mediation, the contribution of one participant regulates the others and vice versa, which suggests the importance of collaboration among learners and teacher in facilitating appropriation of L2 forms and meanings.

Another finding was that low collaborative mediation often in the form of recast was observed in the data. The occurrence of recast could be attributed to the nature of the tasks. The tasks were purely oral and meaning-focused, expecting learners to convey the meaning rather than discuss explicitly the form as in writing tasks in previous research (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Erlam et al., 2013). Given the focus on meaning and communication pressure, the teacher might have opted to provide brief mediation (i.e., recast mediation) in order not to preclude the communication flow. As shown in Excerpts 5, 6, and 7, highly collaborative

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language mediation often included many turn exchanges. Thus, it seemed difficult for the teacher to provide intensively highly collaborative language mediation on the grammatical items such as past tense verbs in a communicative context, especially when learners reported to have learnt them before. The occurrence of recast mediation is also likely due to the nature of the structure—past tense verbs. It appears that there would not be so much that the teacher could do to improve learners' accuracy of past tense verbs through highly collaborative mediation since they already learned the rules and the context where the appropriate use of the past-tense verbs was transparent.

An alternative account for the occurrence of recast mediation can be the teacher's interpretation of learner's ZPD. Learners claimed to have learned the past tense verbs previously and probably had good knowledge of the form. Thus, the teacher might have assumed that brief mediation, like recast, could help self-regulate the form. Although previous research suggested that recast mediation was less effective than scaffolded feedback (Erlam, Ellis & Batstone, 2013; Rassaei, 2014), whether recast mediation in this data could lead to the internalization of the form is still open to discussion since it was difficult to determine learners' ZPD in recast mediation. For example, the learners could appropriate recast immediately as in Excerpt 9 but did not show signs of appropriation of recast due to lack for chances created to do so, as shown in Excerpts 8 and 10. The difference in the learners' appropriation of the recast could possibly be due to whether the teacher offered the chance to appropriate recast and/or whether recast was sensitive to their different ZPDs. Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) suggested that with the same error, learners with different ZPDs appropriated different mediational means. Lantolf (2012) posited that recast could be effective if it was within learners' ZPD. Thus, in the case as in Excerpt 9, the learner whose ZPD seemed to be matched could appropriate successfully minimal implicit mediation like recast. However,

since determining learners' ZPD in recast mediation was not possible in this data, whether the learner appropriates recast is simply speculative.

The findings suggest some pedagogical implications. First, since it is likely that learners face task-related problems during interaction, it requires a degree of teachers' attention to these issues in order to create a facilitative environment for smooth task execution. Second, to facilitate learners' appropriation of language forms and meanings through mediation, the teacher may need to be based on learner's responsivity. Third, the data showed that teachers at times did not create opportunities for learners to work through problems as shown in low collaborative mediation, which emphasizes the importance of creating these mediated learning opportunities in interactions. One possible way to create the learning opportunities in meaning-focused tasks is to provide scaffolded feedback (e.g., negotiation moves) on grammatical issues such as verb tenses (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Rassaei, 2014). However, it should be noted that scaffolded feedback may consist of multiple mediational moves; therefore, teachers need to be cautious when providing it in order not to disrupt the conversational flow. Possibly, teachers only need to generate one or two mediation moves of scaffolded feedback, and then withdraw it, as suggested by Rassaei (2004) and Aljaafreh & Lantolf (1994), if that works effectively and sufficiently for learners to appropriate the mediation. Koshik's (2002) designedly incomplete utterance (DIU) could be an example for teachers to start the first interactional move of scaffolded feedback by initiating an incomplete utterance using learner's words in the previous utterance and pausing just before the erroneous source to prompt the learner to self-recast his/her erroneous utterance. Furthermore, because recast mediation may also work for developing knowledge of language features (Lantolf, 2012), it can be a pedagogically mediational tool to assist learners' development of grammatical knowledge, especially when it creates or allows learners sufficient time, albeit brief, to appropriate the mediation (e.g., uptake recasts).

### Conclusion

The study explored how the teacher assists and mediates learners in task-based activities, focusing on teacher task-related assistance and language mediation. The findings revealed that diverse characteristics of teacher task-related assistance and language mediation were observed. Task-related assistance has been shown to help learners address many task issues in order to complete the activities. Despite being open to discussion about how low collaborative language mediation (e.g., recast mediation) assists learners' grammatical development, the study suggested that scaffolded feedback with different negotiation moves could be one of the language mediations that help learners on the way to the appropriation of language forms and meanings. In addition, it appeared that highly collaborative language mediation opened opportunities for learners to appropriate more successfully teacher's lexical mediation that they requested and negotiated within their ZPD. Inevitably, the study has some limitations. First, because the nature of the study was exploratory, evidence for the role of task-related and language mediation in learners' language development could not be specified. Thus, teachers' task-related assistance and language mediation are perceived as performance-assisted scaffolding that helps the learners perform their intended communication (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), and has potential of enabling the learners to have control over psychological tools (e.g., language use and meanings, and language forms). Second, although the study attempted to record 'student's actions in interaction' during task completion through the lens of sociocultural theory, it employed relatively simple transcription due to the data nature (i.e., audio-recorded interactions) and descriptive utterance-based micromanalysis. Future research would provide more insight by using more sophisticated transcription as well as obtaining video-recorded interactions in order to allow for a more fine-grained analysis such as conversational analysis (van Compernelle, 2016). Additionally, this is a case study of a language classroom that provides rich insight into

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teacher task assistance and language mediation, which therefore limits its generalization.

Despite the limitations, the study showed that teacher task-related assistance and language mediation, especially mediation featuring high collaboration, play a facilitative role in learners' completion of tasks and appropriation of language form.

### Transcription conventions

- \* Utterance with error in pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary
- ... Unfilled pause (one second or longer)
- uh Filled pause
- Self-repair
- Latching speech
- [*italics*]Transcriber comments
- mhm Agreement or affirmative reply
- ? Rising intonation
- ah Comprehension signal
- % % Simultaneous speech

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