

Aspects of Variability in Learner Language

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Variability in Learner Language

The study of "variability" is concerned with understanding the broad variation of forms employed in learner language production. Researchers investigate why learners sometimes produce target language forms correctly, yet other times incorrectly, and what appears to be the inconsistent use and irregular representation of previously "learned" forms. From a classroom perspective, variability is frequently apparent to teachers along the full spectrum of language production activities, and a corresponding requirement for academic investigation and interpretation is now also evident within the body of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. Currently the place of variability theory is still somewhat contentious, with one group of researchers (working within a "homogeneous competence model") regarding variability as a feature of language "performance", which is clearly demarcated from a more substantial focus on language "competence" (e. g. Gregg 1989). This position contrasts substantially with interpretations of other researchers who pursue sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic lines of enquiry, and who regard language variability as providing crucial evidence directly relevant to the process of language acquisition itself. Such research particularly includes significant contributions from Tarone (see Tarone 1998, 1995, 1988, 1987, 1983) and Ellis (see

Ellis 1994a, 1994b, 1990b, 1988, 1987, 1986, 1985). Ellis, for example, reports a body of studies that "provide indisputable evidence of extensive variability in learner language" (1994a: 155). In any case, and irrespective of any ultimate resolution of this debate (see Gregg 1990, Tarone 1990, Ellis 1990a), the prominence of "variability" in SLA theory is today clearly acknowledged.

The objective, of course, remains to interpret causes for observed variability in learner language behaviour. A good starting point is to draw the basic contrast between "systematicity" (showing evidence of underlying patterns) and "variability" (showing no such trends) in learner language production (Ellis 1994a: 135). But while such a distinction appears on the surface to be straightforward, actual interpretation of both "variability" and "systematicity" in fact remains far from clear. Language behaviour that appears to be variable may in fact have systematic underlying causes. Further, different forms of variability need to be determined and categorized. On this score, various factors have been put forward to explain sociolinguistic aspects of variability, including "social class", "ethnicity", and "situational context". Similarly, psycholinguistic accounts seek to explain the contribution played by internal learner factors in other aspects of variability, such as the effect of "planning time" on language production, and the capacity of learners to "monitor" and "regulate" language production. Indeed, the range of potential causes for variability quickly becomes expansive, and the precise determination of underlying systematicity also becomes difficult to establish. With these factors in mind, Ellis (1994a: 134) provides a valuable typology which delineates categories of learner variability, and which maintains the important distinction between systematic and non-systematic variation. Within this framework, systematic

variation is categorized into three contextual factors: psycholinguistic, linguistic, and situational contexts.

The Current Study

The current research study investigates aspects of variability evident in a sample of learner speaking tasks. Prominent causes for variable language behaviour, which have been put forward as significant in the academic literature, are considered and evaluated in light of the current data. Areas of specific investigation include: "task type" ("task-induced variation"), "psycholinguistic factors" ("planning time / attention / monitoring"), "linguistic context", "situational context", and "free (non-systematic) variation".

The first area of investigation, that of "task type", pertains to the variation produced when different tasks, each establishing different forms of discourse, are undertaken. Three tasks are here undertaken, the first being an interactive dialogue task, the second being an unprepared picture description task, and the third being a prepared narrative based on a supplied picture sequence. Ellis argues that task-induced variation provides an alternative window for examining causes that are in fact attributable to the three primary contextual factors (as discussed above), and that most previous research in this area has stopped short of indicating the specific causes of variability (1994a: 138). This argument will be considered in relation to data gathered in the current project. Task-induced variation is also considered in terms of the significance of "communicative language use" as opposed to "non-communicative language use", with the first task being considered as "communicative" in nature, and the second

and third tasks being considered as “non-communicative” in nature.

The significance of prior research into the relationship between “planning time” and task performance by researchers working within a psycholinguistic tradition is next considered. In the current project, Task 1 and Task 2 have no preparation time allocated, while Task 3 has two minutes allocated for this purpose prior to the language production activity. According to current theory, the provision of planning time is regarded as establishing a different discourse form. Hence the difference between “planned discourse” and “unplanned discourse” (Ellis 1994a: 131) constitutes another area of investigation for the current study.

The linguistic and situational contexts of language performance are next investigated. The data are considered for evidence of variability that can be attributed to a specific linguistic (with regard to elements of morphology and syntax) or situational (with regard to “topic”) environment. In such cases, when a specific context is considered to contribute to evidence of variability, it seems reasonable to expect the variability to reoccur when the context is repeated.

Finally the case of “non-systematic” or “free” variation is considered, which would provide evidence of internal variation in the learner’s Second Language (L2) system that exists independently of the First Language (L1) system. According to Ellis’s criteria, this can be said to occur when: “it can be shown that two or more forms are used randomly to perform the same set of functions” (1994a: 127). In order to rule out a broad range of possible contributing causes, Ellis argues that this can only be held to exist when the same “situational”, “linguistic”, and “discourse” contexts are demonstrated, when the same language function is performed, and when the same “processing constraints” exist (Ellis 1985 & 1994: 136). The

current data will be evaluated against these criteria to determine whether there is evidence of free variation in the learner's language system.

The perspective maintained in this study shall be one of describing the form of the learner's language system, as is portrayed by both correct and incorrect language use, rather than that of a formal error analysis, which would extend further to focus on explicating and evaluating the learner's errors and possible causes for these (Selinker 1992: 118). However, in order to depict the form of samples of learner language, it is useful to draw a contrast (where differences exist) against expected norms for native-speaker language. Hence learner language will be considered in terms of apparent inaccuracies, but possible sources for errors will not be further pursued.

Research Methodology

THE SUBJECT. Consideration was given to the type of subject who would provide meaningful data for the purposes of this study. Since the first task requires an interview situation, there is a requirement for a sufficient level of oral communication skills. Accordingly, a second-language learner with basic oral communication skills was identified, and she subsequently agreed to participate in the study. During a meeting between the subject and the researcher, the tasks were explained and subsequently undertaken. The learner's speech production was recorded and subsequently transcribed for the purposes of analysis and interpretation.

The subject of the current investigation is a 63-year-old Russian lady named Valentina, who has lived in Adelaide (South Australia) since 1993 when she emigrated from Moscow. In her previous life in Russia, she

worked for 35 years as a high-school teacher of Russian languages; during this time however, she undertook no English language study. Upon her arrival in Adelaide she attended English classes for about one year, but said that she was sick at the time and so it was difficult for her to regularly attend classes. For the past four years she has attended a once-a-week 2-hour English conversation group held by volunteer workers for a local church organization. These meetings provide an opportunity for ongoing conversation practice between 30 migrant ESL learners and 15 native-speaker parishioners, led by a single experienced ESL teacher. Valentina said that she enjoyed the meetings and that they were important to develop her English, but that the time allocated was not sufficient for her learning to progress far. Although resident in Adelaide for six years, she speaks mostly Russian in her daily life (to her son, and to members of her Russian Orthodox church group), so the previously mentioned conversation group appears to provide the only substantial opportunity for her English language development. While the researcher soon discovered that her oral skills were at the low end of the desirable range, she completed the tasks satisfactorily (with some rather minimal vocabulary prompting required in the third exercise), and so her data was retained and used for the current study.

PROCEDURE. The subject undertook three speaking tasks, designed to each produce different types of discourse. The first task comprised an informal interview between researcher and subject, which included general questions about her family, her life in Australia, previous English study, past occupations, interests, and travel experiences. The interview was regarded as producing discourse of the type: "interactive dialogue". The second task required the subject to spontaneously describe a complex picture portraying various people, activities, and objects, all set

within a physical landscape, and was considered as providing a discourse sample of the type: "unstructured, unplanned monologue". The third task required the learner to construct and relate a story suggested by a series of eight related images. Preparation time of 2 minutes was provided to the learner in order to study the images and to consider what structures she would use and how to compose the story. Of course, it is not possible to say to what effect the learner actually put this preparation time, since she did not speak or have access to any additional resources during this time. The third task was considered as providing a sample of discourse from the type: "structured, planned monologue". The learner's performance of the three tasks was taped to provide about 15 minutes of recorded data. Task materials, including a transcription of the interview questions used in Task 1, a transcription of the learner's responses to the three tasks, and the two picture prompts used in Tasks 2 and 3, are available from the researcher.

DATA ANALYSIS. Transcriptions of the learner's responses to the three tasks are considered the data for the current project. The learner's language system is hence analysed in terms of five prominent features of syntax and morphology: usage of articles, usage of pronouns, usage of plural (-s) morphemes, usage of verb forms, and usage of negation structures. During the process of data analysis, however, a number of complex issues arose, and it is important to further consider the context of these issues.

Firstly, there was a substantial difference between the quantities of language generated by the three tasks, so that the value in directly comparing frequencies of any specific form between tasks appears questionable. A count of the total number of words produced by the learner for each task was consequently undertaken, with Task 1 generating 309 words, Task 2

generating 93 words, and Task 3 generating 114 words. Hence it can be said that Task 1 (an "open-ended" activity) generated approximately three times more language than Tasks 2 or 3, which each generated similar quantities of language.

Secondly, for each syntax and morphology form examined, the researcher wished to account for both the frequency and accuracy of forms produced. For this reason, non-standard variants of forms, including null forms, which appeared to be significant in the learner's language, are included in the data. Accuracy percentages are gauged by comparing learner forms against standard usage; in those instances where the standard form was not clear, the researcher was required to select a most probable form. Also, the learner-language was investigated in terms of the establishment of obligatory contexts for each feature, so that cases of "omission" or "non-use" by the learner were also considered. In the following analysis, instances of target language forms are counted, both in terms of regular and non-regular forms. Relative totals are then determined which pertain to the number of forms produced, and to the accuracy of those forms.

Presentation of Results

USE OF ARTICLES. The learner's usage of articles was investigated in terms of the three standard forms ("a", "an", "the"), and the null form ("---"), which is frequently used by the learner. The data is summarised in the following table (accuracy percentages are not provided in cases where no forms were produced).

It is apparent from the data that the learner's most abundant choice of

		"a"	"an"	"the"	"---"
FREQUENCY	Task 1	0	0	5	13
	Task 2	0	0	4	9
	Task 3	0	0	3	12
ACCURACY	Task 1	--	--	33%	0%
	Task 2	--	--	40%	0%
	Task 3	--	--	0%	0%

article (in obligatory contexts for this feature) is the null form ("---"), and that this results in extremely deficient and inaccurate deployment of article forms generally. Significantly, the indefinite article forms ("a/an") do not appear on a single occasion, and the definite article form ("the") is used with limited accuracy, so the learner has demonstrated poor control of these forms according to standard language norms.

USE OF PRONOUNS. Use of pronouns was studied in terms of subject forms (I, you, he-she-it, we, you, they), object forms (me, you, him-her-it, us, you, them), gender forms (masculine, feminine, neuter), number forms (singular, plural), and possessive forms (mine, yours, his-hers-its, ours, yours, theirs). There were no recorded instances of the last-mentioned category, so this is not further discussed.

		subject	object	gender	number
FREQUENCY	Task 1	40	1	1	41
	Task 2	7	0	0	7
	Task 3	16	0	15	16
ACCURACY	Task 1	95%	0%	100%	100%
	Task 2	100%	--	--	100%
	Task 3	100%	--	67%	100%

The first point that is evident in the data is that Task 1 generated very

many pronoun forms, whereas Task 2 generated few. Further, the number of "object" forms produced by all three tasks was negligible, and only Task 3 produced enough "gender" forms to warrant further consideration. Accuracy percentages for the three tasks suggest that the learner has good control of pronoun forms generally, with both "subject" forms and "number" forms used accurately. In terms of "gender" forms, the data from Task 3 suggests that the learner does not distinguish male and female pronoun forms well, with there being insufficient data from the other Tasks to confirm or refute this supposition.

USE OF PLURAL (-s) MORPHEMES. Three categories were studied pertaining to usage of the plural (-s) morpheme within the grammatical contexts established by the learner. Firstly, instances of *correctly* used forms were counted. Secondly, incorrectly used forms were counted in which the learner *omitted* the (-s) form but this was grammatically required within the context. Finally, incorrectly used forms were counted in which the learner *added* the (-s) form, but this was grammatically incorrect within the context.

		correct	omits	adds	TOTAL
FREQUENCY	Task 1	7	6	5	18
	Task 2	3	2	0	5
	Task 3	0	1	0	1
ACCURACY	Task 1	39%	33%	28%	100%
	Task 2	60%	40%	0%	100%
	Task 3	0%	100%	0%	100%

It is apparent that Task 1 again generated a substantially higher number of forms than the other Tasks, and that Task 3 produced a single form only, so that it is not appropriate to further consider the data from

Task 3 in terms of accuracy of usage. The learner's accuracy in Task 1 and Task 2 show about an even chance of the (-s) morpheme being correctly used, with incorrect omission occurring more frequently than incorrect addition. The data generally suggests the subject's use of the plural (-s) morpheme does not closely correlate with target language usage norms.

USE OF VERB FORMS. The learner's usage of present tense, third person singular verb forms was investigated. Usage was categorized in terms of the employment of regular and irregular verbs, and in terms of correct and incorrect usage in each case.

		Regular Verbs		Irregular Verbs	
		correct	incorrect	correct	incorrect
FREQUENCY	Task 1	0	0	1	1
	Task 2	0	0	0	5
	Task 3	0	5	1	7
ACCURACY	Task 1	--	--	50%	50%
	Task 2	--	--	0%	100%
	Task 3	0%	100%	12%	88%

In this case, Task 3 generated a total of 13 forms, Task 2 generated 5 forms, and Task 1 generated just 2 forms. The majority of forms generated were also irregular, with just five regular verbs employed in Task 3. Accuracy figures are generally very low, with the most frequent error being the omission of necessary "to be" forms, and also the omission of required (-s/-es) morphemes.

USE OF NEGATION. Negation was studied in terms of the learner's use of correct and incorrect forms within the grammatical contexts established.

Task 1 produced the most negative structures, with Task 2 and Task

		correct	incorrect	TOTAL
FREQUENCY	Task 1	3	3	6
	Task 2	3	0	3
	Task 3	1	1	2
ACCURACY	Task 1	50%	50%	100%
	Task 2	100%	0%	100%
	Task 3	50%	50%	100%

3 producing just a few instances each. In terms of accuracy of use, there appears to be more than an even chance of correct formation. However, the accuracy of these figures is uncertain, since 6 (or 86%) of the correct forms produced (across all three tasks) comprised the formulaic repetition of a single expression ("I don't know"). When these instances of formulaic repetition are discounted, 4/5 (or 80%) of the remaining forms are erroneous. Incorrect forms frequently employed "no" rather than "not", and also contained mistakes in word order and in formation of verbal groups.

Further Discussion

TASK-INDUCED VARIATION. In order to evaluate the presence of task-induced variation, it is necessary to consider evidence of trends in the data that can be attributed to differences between tasks. In the first area studied (usage of articles), there is no clear trend of differences evident between tasks. There is no marked difference in the quantities of forms produced, and it is hard to evaluate the difference in accuracy for "the" in Task 3 on the basis of just three occurrences. Rather, the prevailing trend of frequent use of the null form, and omission of (a, an) forms, is equally evident in all three tasks. In the second area studied (usage of pronouns),

a substantial difference in the quantity of pronoun forms generated is evident between tasks. Task 1 produced the most forms, and Task 2 produced the least forms. In terms of total frequency counts, the ratio of (T1: T2: T3) can be expressed as (41: 7: 16). A clear difference is also evident in gender forms, with Task 3 generating substantially more instances, and showing lower accuracy of use. In the third area studied (usage of plural (-s) morphemes), a difference in the quantity of forms generated is again evident, with Task 1 generating the most forms and Task 3 the least forms (T1: T2: T3 = 18: 5: 1). When the accuracy figure for Task 3 is discounted on the basis of insufficient evidence, Tasks 1 and 2 show an approximately similar proportion of errors, although omission errors feature exclusively in Task 2, while both types are evident in Task 1. In the fourth area studied (usage of verb forms), Task 3 produced significantly more third person singular verb forms than Task 2, which produced more again than Task 1 (T1: T2: T3 = 2: 5: 13). Task 3 generated a number of regular verbs, whereas Tasks 1 and 2 did not. In general, verb forms were used erroneously across all tasks. In the final area studied (usage of negation), Task 1 produced the most forms (T1: T2: T3 = 6: 3: 2), but it is difficult to compare the accuracy of use on account of the generally low frequency counts, and the repeated use of a formulaic utterance ("I don't know").

In summary, it can be said that Task 1 produced the most pronoun forms, the most plural (-s) morphemes, and the most negative forms, while Task 3 produced the most third person singular verb forms (and correspondingly, the most gender pronoun forms). Also, Task 2 features a higher proportion of omitted plural (-s) morphemes, and Task 3 produced a number of regular verb forms. Beyond these observations, it is difficult to

make any clear statements concerning differences between the three tasks. Indeed, what is most evident in the data is the general multiplicity of differences that exist across aspects of language production. The broad picture is manifestly complex, and it appears that attempts to draw insightful conclusions will meet with substantial difficulty. When one considers, for example, the previously discussed research findings that predict the existence of significant differences between tasks that involve, and do not involve, "communicative" language use, one is required to evaluate the differences between Task 1 (as a "communicative" task), and Tasks 2 and 3 (as "non-communicative" tasks). In the current data, the three differences noted in relation to Task 1 (see above) could hence be attributed to the difference between "communicative" and "non-communicative" language use. However, other causes for these differences need also to be considered (including the length of the interview and the type of questions asked) before a conclusion can be drawn. Further, potential differences also exist between other Task groupings (e. g. between: Task 2 - Tasks 1/3, or Task 3 - Tasks 1/2), and it is not clear to what causes these differences can be attributed. And while the findings of this study may be limited by the sampling undertaken (see below), it is not clear what significance can be attached to the predicted difference between "communicative" and "non-communicative" tasks, when set in such a context of broad variability. Also, it will clearly be difficult to attribute forms of task-induced variability to psycholinguistic, linguistic, and situational contexts, as Ellis has argued is necessary (see above).

PSYCHOLINGUISTIC FACTORS. Ellis (1994a: 132) discusses the effect of psycholinguistic factors in terms of the construct "attention" -

with regard to both what is "attended" to, and the extent to which the "attention" is conscious or not. Key concepts include the effects of "planning time" and "monitoring" upon language production. In the current study, planning time was allocated to Task 3, so that it is possible to consider differences between Task 3 and Tasks 1/2 as a potential indication of the significance of "planning time". The following differences have been noted: Task 3 produced the most third person singular verb forms (including a number of regular verb forms), and also produced the most gender pronoun forms. Also, Task 3 produced the least accurate use of definite articles, and the lowest number of plural (-s) morphemes. But while such differences can be established between Task 3 and Tasks 1/2, once again the specific effect of "planning time" cannot be clearly determined without further investigation, since Task 3 also differs from Tasks 1/2 in areas apart from the allocation of planning time. Consequently, specific predictions for the forms of planned and unplanned discourse, where unplanned discourse is characterised: "speakers rely more on the immediate context to help them convey their message, make use of structures that tend to emerge early during acquisition (for example, demonstrative modifiers, active voice and present rather than past tenses) and make extensive use of repetition and word replacement" (Ellis 1994a: 131) are not established in the current study. Similarly, predictions that: "Planned discourse is likely to manifest more frequent use of target-language variants and also greater overall complexity than unplanned discourse" (Ellis 1994a: 151) are also not established. However, these points are not necessarily significant, since it is clear that it is the use which a learner makes of "planning time" that is important (although this is difficult to determine), and further, the current subject can be regarded as having not developed past early acquisition

stages, and therefore may not be in possession of more complex structures which may have been produced as a consequence of planning time. Further, the substantial problem discussed in the preceding section is also relevant to the current analysis: that is, in a context of broad variation, the general significance of a particular set of differences cannot be evaluated.

There is some evidence that the learner was "monitoring" her output in the current data. A pattern of ongoing self-correction appears in Task 3, when incorrect gender pronouns ("she") are used and then immediately corrected by alternate forms ("he") - a form of "micro-monitoring" according to Ellis (1994a: 132). This pattern suggests that the learner was monitoring her output and "attending" to what she regarded as the requirements of correct speech production. Notably, the learner was regulating her language according to internal knowledge, since external guidance was not provided. This behaviour is plausibly accounted for according to the learner's awareness that she was participating in a study project, and that consequently her language would probably be subjected to some form of evaluation (although the same pattern may equally appear in general conversation).

LINGUISTIC FACTORS. Ellis describes effects of linguistic context as being evident at each of the levels of language production: phonological, morphological, and syntactic levels (1994a: 143). Consequently, it is worthwhile studying the areas of morphology and syntax investigated in the current project, to see whether any patterns can be attributed to surrounding linguistic forms. But while the data clearly establishes a number of tendencies in the learner's general language form (including: omission of indefinite articles; omission of verb "to be" forms; omission of third person

regular verb morphemes; incorrect construction of negative structures using "no" + Verb) the extent to which these factors are caused by the immediate linguistic context is difficult to conclude. Indeed, given the low proficiency level of the current subject, and the corresponding quantity and complexity of errors in her language production, a focussed investigation into specific errors and the relation of those errors to the surrounding linguistic environment is not possible. Further specific research would need to be undertaken in order to reach conclusions in this area.

SITUATIONAL FACTORS. Ellis acknowledges the difficulty of establishing the relationship between situational factors and the learner's use of L2, and suggests that this is because: "the nature of the link between attention and social factors - the primary causative variables - is particularly unclear in the case of L2 learners" (1994a: 148). In the current study, the process for accurately attributing results to situational factors is uncertain, so that it is again difficult to make conclusions in this area. Further, key areas, for example, that of "style-shifting", and that of the "relationship" between subject and interlocutor, are not investigated by the current data, and once again focussed studies in these areas would be required in order to draw conclusions. However, the effect of one situational factor, that of "topic" (Ellis 1994a: 149) does appear to be relevant, since the subject appeared particularly deficient in prerequisite vocabulary for Task 3 (concerned with a fishing expedition), and consequently had difficulty completing the exercise satisfactorily. Since she appeared at the time of undertaking the test to become somewhat flustered, a limited quantity of basic vocabulary prompting was provided. Although not undertaken in the current study, the significance of this specific

situational factor could be further investigated by comparing performance on the current Task 3 to performance on a similar task that comprised a set of images depicting a different, and more personally relevant, topic (e. g. a shopping trip).

FREE VARIATION. As discussed, "free variation" is the random use of distinct forms by a learner to perform the same function (see above). Ellis warns of a significant danger of misinterpreting free variation in cases where systematicity is not obvious, but exists in a latent form. Consequently, he argues that in order to demonstrate the existence of free variation, there is a requirement for identical situational, linguistic, and discourse contexts, and for the learner to be performing the same language function and to be operating under the same processing constraints, so that alternative contributing causes can be effectively ruled out (Ellis 1985 & 1994a: 136). In the current project, these conditions hold true for performance on a single task, but not for performance on different tasks (which set up different discourse contexts), so the current data can be further investigated.

While there is insufficient evidence in Tasks 1 and 2 to make any claims concerning random variation, in Task 3 there exists what appears to be a substantial pattern of gender confusion, whereby the third person subject routinely switches between male and female forms ("he", "she"). The existence of this pattern suggests that the learner does not distinguish between these forms in her learner-language, so that she produces them somewhat randomly in spoken discourse. However, her tendency to immediately correct erroneous forms also suggests that she is aware of the required target language usage, and that she is in a stage of attempting to

control production in this area. In any case, the data suggest evidence of "free variation", which is neither supported nor contradicted by data in Tasks 1 and 2, since no examples of this form are there elicited.

LIMITATIONS TO FINDINGS. The current study draws upon a sample of language produced by a single learner, so that results obtained apply to that learner only, and it is difficult to say the degree to which results may be generalised. This type of sampling is identified as "incidental", with more substantial results being achievable from broader sampling techniques, including that of a "specific sample" (a single sample taken from several language learners), or a "massive sample" (several samples taken from a large number of language learners) (Ellis 1994a: 49). Clearly, the larger the sample size, the more that observed trends can be attributed to the general case of language learners, rather than to the case of a single learner. Further, since the subject was selected on the basis of "accessibility" to the researcher, the sampling can be identified as "opportunity sampling", which "may produce biased samples, and therefore greater likelihood of error" (Burns 1997: 86). But while the current sample size and methodology constitute an obvious limitation to the findings, the current study is regarded as valuable on account of the meaningful direction it provides to future research projects.

Also, the current study investigates learner's language in terms of features of syntax and morphology, which can be interpreted within a broader framework as belonging to the learner's "linguistic competence". There is no analysis of areas of "communicative competence", or of other aspects of linguistic competence, such as "phonology" or "lexicon". Further, since only surface forms of language are examined, it is clear that

this study does not consider more involved areas such as specific learner strategies (e. g. "avoidance" of particular linguistic structures), which may in fact have significant bearing on the form of language production.

Conclusions

1. The current study investigates aspects of variability in learner-language production. However, the data suggest the existence of a multiplicity of complex differences in produced forms, so that it is extremely difficult to identify or attribute specific causes. In order to do this, controlled experimentation would be required that isolated specific variables and examined their variation closely. Consequently, the need is indicated for researchers to explore learner-language with a broad range of tasks, each designed to elicit a different spectrum of language forms. Further, portrayals of learner-language need to be established from a multi-dimensional depiction of performance on a range of tasks.

2. Ellis's observation that previous research suggests a significant difference between areas of "communicative" and "non-communicative" tasks (Ellis 1994a: 139) may be supported by the current study, although other causes could also be attributed. In the current study, the significance of the communicative nature of tasks is not clear when set in a broad context of other differences that simultaneously coexist.

3. Differences appear to also be evident in areas pertaining to psycholinguistic context, however it is again difficult to isolate specific effects (such as that of "planning time") from other factors that are also present, and the

significance of those differences is again difficult to verify. Specific predictions for the form of differences between planned and unplanned discourse (Ellis 1994a) are not here established. The argument that the value of planning time depends upon how effectively the learner uses this time appears relevant to the current subject. A pattern of ongoing self-correction in Task 3 provides evidence that the learner was actively monitoring her language output in this exercise.

4. It is difficult to establish the effect of linguistic context on learner-language variability. In order to do this, more specific studies would need to investigate linguistic context at a closer level of detail. Similarly, it is difficult to establish situational factors that have contributed to aspects of variability, although in the current study, the effect of "topic" appears to have had a bearing on Task 3, since the learner lacked specific vocabulary items required to complete this task. Future research needs to focus upon narrowly designated areas, and to examine how empirical results can be attributed to contextual factors, and any necessary conditions for doing this.

5. Free variation, in the area of third person pronoun gender forms ("he", "she"), is evident in the data collected from Task 3 of this study. This finding suggests that the learner attributes no semantic value to this gender distinction in her learner-language, so that the two forms are produced interchangeably in spoken discourse. She also appears, however, to be in the process of a developmental stage of learning to correct production of this form.

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