

Creative Imitation in Second Language Continuation Talks

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Abstract: This study reports a conversation analytic case study designed to investigate in a fine-grained way the use and the features of creative imitation in expression during second language (L2) continuation talks and to evaluate how language proficiency and other factors influence its use. Our data consisted of audio and video recordings of two pieces of conversation between two L2 speakers with contrasting proficiency and a native speaker of Chinese, as well as a respective stimulated recall interview with each of them. The findings revealed that creative imitation closely paired language learning with use and reinforced form-context mapping; it reduced language errors and facilitated idea generation by scaffolding, thereby ironing out the comprehension-production asymmetry. Also, creative imitation employed by the two L2 learners varied, that is, the advanced-level L2 learner outperformed the elementary-level one in both frequency and quality of its use. The findings have both theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords: The Xu-argument; Second Language (L2) Continuation Talks; Creative Imitation.

1. Introduction

Dialogue, one of the most natural and basic means of communication (Pickering & Garrod, 2004) as well as language learning, is fundamentally driven by *xu* (Wang, 2016, 2017), a Chinese word with a combined connotation of completion, extension, and creation (CEC). *Xu* informs daily communication where interactants complete and extend each other's speech based on comprehension and create new content in succession, prompting new cycles of speech comprehension and production. The *xu*-argument is a freshly emerging view on language acquisition initiated by Wang (2016). Resting on the usage-based approach (Beckner et al., 2009; Ellis & Wulff, 2015; Tomasello, 2003; Tyler, 2010), it contends that via *xu* or CEC language is learned while high efficiency is achieved. *Xu* plays a mediating part in the integration of language production and comprehension, thereby promoting language learning efficiency.

Creative imitation, the hallmark of the *xu*-argument as well as the heart of language learning, refers to language imitation paired with idea creation (Wang, 2021). Take a L2 dialogue for instance. What L2 learners comprehend stems from native or expert speakers, and the ideas they generate are of their creation. The minute they fail to express themselves, they can imitate how the language is constructed by their competent interlocutors, enabling the coupling of comprehension and production to happen within rich contexts and in turn inspiring language learning. Learners' alignment to the words, phrases, and sentence patterns of the utterances from their interlocutors can expedite their L2 learning. This study is thus motivated to understand the use and manifestation of creative imitation in L2 continuation talks and investigate the differences in the use of creative imitation between L2 learners at advanced and elementary levels. It is expected to proffer an empirical basis for the analyses of creative imitation in the real-time conversational setting.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Xu-argument

The notion that language is learned via interaction has been empirically verified throughout approximately five decades and has impacted on second language acquisition (SLA) theories as well as L2 instructional practices (Gass & Mackey, 2015; Mackey et al., 2012); however, it is recent progress in L2 teaching and learning research that traces the root of interaction (Wang, 2016, 2017). Leveraging the interactive alignment studies (Atkinson et al., 2007; Costa et al., 2008; Pickering & Garrod, 2004) and the usage-based perspective (which deems language knowledge as experience acquired through use and accentuates the significance of context in language acquisition and use), Wang (2016, 2017) advanced the *xu*-argument, a view on language acquisition aimed at uncovering its cognitive mechanism. To conceptualize the *xu*-argument, it is essential to understand what is *xu*. *Xu*, a Chinese word, denotes to continue (what is not yet complete) or continuation. Wang (2016) argues that *xu* is constantly at work in daily communication and interaction and used the word to streamline the process by which interlocutors are engaged in interaction through the actions of (utterance) completion, (content) extension, and (topic) creation (CEC) to keep their dialogue flowing (Yang & Lu, 2021). Without *xu*, interaction would be impossible. That is, *xu* or CEC gives impetus to interaction. Given the abovementioned recognition of the facilitative role of interaction in the process of L2 learning, Wang (2016, 2017) proposed a view on language acquisition named the *xu*-argument, making headway in forwarding the interaction approach (Gass & Mackey, 2015).

As a recent development of SLA theory, the *xu*-argument highlights that the pivotal role of interaction as a salient enabler for L2 learning emanates from *xu*. The notion postulates that i) language is acquired through *xu*, and ii) high efficiency in language learning is achieved by *xu* (Wang, 2016). The central tenet of this view consists in, in Wang's terminology (2016, 2017), "learning-by-continuation" or "learning-by-CEC". This argument is bolstered by two key

findings from dialogue given that underneath dialogue lies the mechanism governing language acquisition and use: i) a profusion of incomplete utterances in dialogue promoting completion and extension and ii) an asymmetry between language comprehension and production occasioning alignment (i.e., a socio-cognitive process entailing dynamic coordination and adaptation) during interaction (Wang, 2016, 2021; Wang & Wang, 2015). Inspired by the interactive alignment research and drawing on years of foreign language instruction practices, the xu-argument goes beyond and directs an efficient route to L2 learning through the coupling of comprehension and production during interaction that embeds language learning and use within contexts, with xu capacitating learners toward the goal of close integration and L2 development. In specific, the xu-argument considers alignment to be both the reflection and booster of the coupling of production and comprehension. Xu serves as a mediating or scaffolding role in bringing comprehension to bear on production and in turn bridging the gap between them, leading to alignment and subsequently language learning.

Despite the theoretical promises of the xu-argument and the efforts being made to develop various xu-based tasks, inquiries into dialogue under the framework of the xu-argument remain nearly vacant. It is noted that to answer how xu-related strategies improve interactional competence Yang and Lu (2021) inquired into the principles of the xu-argument in real-time dialogue with a conversation analytic design. Evidence was found in their case study surveying the role of xu in discursive practice and their data analyses were based on an English conversation between an ESL advanced-level speaker and an elementary-level one and a stimulated recall interview. Results demonstrated that the expert learner used xu in the early stage of interaction while the beginner gradually aligned with him in the later stage with xu-related strategies to realize mutual understanding and to facilitate learning.

2.2. Creative Imitation

The xu-argument sees language learning as a process of creative imitation, i.e., imitation of language use in company with creation of ideas, powered by the comprehension-production asymmetry. “Where there is xu, there will be integration of comprehension with production” (Wang, 2021, p. 272). In the view of the xu-argument, efficient language learning is realized by tightly pairing comprehension with production and constantly eliminating the asymmetry grasped between the two or aligning production with what is fully grasped from the input.

In the course of creative imitation, what learners comprehend derives from the other interlocutor, and the ideas they produce are of their creation. When they run into language impediments, they can imitate the way in which the language is used by their interlocutors (Wang, 2021). In other words, through creative imitation, L2 learners take in their interlocutors’ language knowledge to convey their thoughts, leading to improved L2 skills. In this fashion, creative imitation molds a solid amalgamation between language learning and use in the immediate context (Wang, 2021).

Imitation here does not equate to pure behavioral repetition. Instead, imitation of this kind in language production can be deemed as structural priming (Bock, 1986) or linguistic similarities through situation models constructed in rich contexts, which enables L2 learners to align with their interlocutors’ linguistic representations and learn to speak in

their interlocutors’ manner. Therefore, it implies dynamic adaptation or coordination between comprehension and production.

Tapping into the comprehension-production asymmetry, creative imitation supplies an inexhaustible source for language learning (Wang, 2021). Xu-based creative imitation brings comprehension and production into convergence in that learners can imitate the language constructions in preceding utterances once they fall short of expression, molding learners’ language into more target-like forms. Wang (2021) suggests that it is creative imitation, characteristic of and innate in xu, that “irons out” the comprehension-production asymmetry, forwards idea expression by language scaffolding, and inhibits negative L1 transfer. From this perspective, the quintessence of language learning consists in xu-based creative imitation.

2.3. The Present Study: Using Conversation Analysis to Investigate L2 Continuation Talks

The present study adopts a data-driven conversational analytic perspective to analyze L2 continuation talks and formulates a set of data coding schemes to operationalize creative imitation. Creative imitation amalgamates two aspects: meaning creation and language imitation. To operationalize creative imitation, the overlap between language imitation and meaning creation should be identified.

To measure language imitation, steps can be first taken to recognize linguistic alignment at lexical, phrasal, and sentential levels. In this particular study, lexical alignment (LA) is defined as the incorporation of target words (i.e., words previously unknown or unfamiliar to the learners or not a part of their active vocabulary but appearing in their competent interlocutors’ speech) in the learners’ utterances. Phrasal alignment refers to the noun, verb, adjective, adverb, and prepositional phrases which are either exactly identical to those of their competent interlocutors’ speech (FPA, for full phrasal alignment) or partially same, keeping only the “heads (e.g., the noun in the NP)” in phrases but having some adjustments in the optional positions (PPA, for partial phrasal alignment). Sentential alignment is identified as sentence structures that are either exactly identical to those of their competent interlocutors’ speech (FSA, for full sentential alignment) or partially same, keeping only the “heads (the NP or VP)” in sentences but altering other optional elements (PSA, for partial sentential alignment).

After coding linguistic alignment, language imitation is then gauged by counting the number of “T-units” in learners’ output utterances indexed to LA, FPA, PPA, FSA, and PSA, and such T-units are coded as LI T-units, short for “Language Imitation T-units.” Following Plakans and Gebriel’s (2013) definition, T-units are defined by Hunt (1977) as “a single main clause (or independent clause) plus whatever other subordinate clauses or non-clauses that are attached to, or embedded within, that one main clause” (pp. 93-94). Hunt explained that the T in T-units stands for ‘terminable’; grammatically, a T-unit can be terminated with a period or other terminal marks.

Therefore, creative imitation is measured by totaling the number of LI T-units coinciding with expressing new ideas based on learners’ original ones. Such T-units are coded as LI/MC T-units, the abbreviation for “Language Imitation/Meaning Creation T-units.”

3. Method

The present case study adopts a conversational analytic design with stimulated recall interviews included. This section presents the research methodology of the study. Based on the previous literature review, the research questions are proposed first, followed by the research design for the study.

3.1. Research Questions

The current study is designed to scrutinize how creative imitation is operated as the dialogues unfold between L2 learners with different proficiency and a native speaker, and how language proficiency and some other elements shape the use. To be specific, this study is to answer the following key questions:

- 1) What are the features of creative imitation in CSL continuation talks?
- 2) How does language proficiency influence creative imitation in L2 continuation talks? Are there any other factors exerting similar effect?

3.2. Research Design

This part presents the research design of the present study. It delineates the subjects and the procedure of data collection, transcription, and analysis of this study.

3.2.1. Subjects

Two Russian CSL learners at different proficiency levels and one native speaker of Chinese took part in this study. At the time of data collection, Alex, a male Russian, had learned both Chinese and English for over 15 years, worked in China as an English teacher for six years, and passed HSK level V. Inna, a female Russian, worked in China as an English teacher for two years and passed HSK level II. Hong is a native speaker of Chinese as well as a college instructor and had never met with the abovementioned two CSL learners before being involved in the case study. For the purpose of this study, we are to refer to Alex and Inna as the expert speaker and the novice speaker respectively, considering the variance in their proficiency and experience in learning and using Chinese.

3.2.2. Data Collection and Transcription

By recording and filming, the data of this study come from two pieces of 30-minute dialogue of two Russian CSL learners—Alex the expert, and Inna the novice—with Hong the native speaker respectively, and a respective stimulated recall interview with the two learners following the dialogues. All talks and interviews were audio- and video-recorded with subjects' permission and transcribed afterward.

In this research, Alex and Inna were required to talk in Chinese with Hong respectively. Both talks lasted 30 minutes. In the first half of the talk, a L2 speaker and the native speaker introduced themselves and talked freely about anything; in the second half, the two sides discussed the details of a picture and exchanged their views on it. Furthermore, in order to clarify obscure or ambiguous utterances to ensure accurate data transcription, the stimulated recall interview is utilized to ascertain the interlocutors' intentions of applying particular verbal or non-verbal actions. Immediately after the dialogue, one researcher conducted a respective stimulated recall interview in Chinese and English with each of the interlocutors.

Data transcription centers on all verbal and non-verbal information in conversation. To make legible the minutiae of the sequential and temporal organization of the talk, we transcribed the participants' verbal data with a high degree of

granularity by administering the system invented by Gail Jefferson (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984) and annotated their non-verbal actions with a scheme inspired by Murphy (2005) and Mondada (2011) incorporating textual description and photographic images. We finally collected a 6,964-word (605-turn) transcription of the conversation between the competent speaker Alex and the native speaker Hong and a 5,571-word (329-turn) one between the beginner Inna and Hong.

3.2.3. Data Analysis

The analytic practices in CA take two fundamental approaches to analysis: single-case and collection-based analyses (Kasper & Wagner, 2011). In the first type, single fragments of talk are examined to showcase concrete interactional practices through typical instances; in the second, the results in reference to a particular aspect are summarized from a cumulative collection of single-case analyses. The current study adopts both the single-case and collection-based approaches to a fine-grained analysis by first selecting a series of cases demonstrating the interlocutors' efforts in the use of creative imitation, and then comparing all the cases with respect to the deployment of creative imitation to discriminate how the expert and novice speakers are similar to or different from each other in the use of creative imitation.

In addition, a coding scheme is formulated to pinpoint creative imitation by recognizing the overlap between language imitation and meaning creation. To measure language imitation, steps are first taken to identify linguistic alignment at lexical (LA), phrasal (FPA and PPA), and sentential (FSA and PSA) levels. Then, creative imitation is captured by tallying the number of the linguistic alignment (i.e., LA, FPA, PPA, FSA, and PSA) coinciding with expressing new ideas based on learners' original ones. It is noted that as learners produce new ideas in conversation, they naturally orchestrate CEC strategies. Accordingly, creative imitation can be pinpointed when it meets both of the following prerequisites: 1) linguistic alignment exists; 2) xu or CEC is in play. It should be also pointed out that a typical kind of creative imitation occurs when learners align their language at any linguistic level with their interlocutors' to overcome barriers to idea expression signaled by particular verbal and non-verbal actions.

4. Results

4.1. The Use of Creative Imitation in L2 Continuation Talks

The following Tables 1-5 present creative imitation at three linguistic levels—namely, lexical, phrasal, and sentential levels—in the interactional data used by Alex the expert and Inna the novice.

4.1.1. Creative Imitation at the Lexical Level

Tables 1-2 display creative imitation at the lexical level developed by Alex and Inna respectively. Creative imitation at the lexical level manifests itself in LA with CEC being involved. As Tables 1 and 2 indicate, differences exist between Alex's and Inna's use of creative imitation at this level. Alex the expert assimilated seven words from Hong the native speaker's discourses to convey his own ideas in the interactional data. By contrast, Inna the novice only borrowed one word. Particularly, the word“忧郁”was used by Alex three times on disparate topics as well as“地毯”twice while the word“如果”was applied by Inna twice in her speech.

Table 1. Creative imitation used by Alex at the lexical level

Word	Line	Frequency
奇特 (<i>unique, special, strange, uncommon</i>)	148	1
样式 (<i>style, look</i>)	194	1
忧郁 (<i>melancholy, glum, despondent</i>)	208, 312, 538	3
单调 (<i>drab, dull</i>)	218, 406	2
墙漆 (<i>wall paint</i>)	256	1
样板 (<i>replica</i>)	417	1
地毯 (<i>carpet</i>)	460, 462	2

Table 2. Creative imitation used by Inna at the lexical level

Word	Line	Frequency
如果 (<i>if</i>)	142, 220	2

4.1.2. Creative Imitation at the Phrasal Level

Tables 3-4 summarize creative imitation at the phrasal level produced by Alex and Inna respectively. Creative imitation at the phrasal level is reflected by FPA and PPA with CEC being involved. Similarly, Alex's use of creative imitation at this level is more frequent and complex than Inna's. Alex incorporated four phrases into his idea expression from Hong's speech while Inna adopted two.

Table 3. Creative imitation used by Alex at the phrasal level

Phrase	Line	Frequency
从.....到..... (<i>from ... to ...</i>)	272	1
很实用 (<i>very practical and functional</i>)	290, 292	2
心理学的角度 (<i>psychological point of view, perspective of psychology, psychologically speaking</i>)	316	1
从.....的角度 (<i>from...point of view, from the perspective of ..., ... speaking</i>)	366	1

Table 4. Creative imitation used by Inna at the phrasal level

Phrase	Line	Frequency
很方便 (<i>very convenient</i>)	62	1
骑自行车 (<i>to ride a bicycle</i>)	218	1

4.1.3. Creative Imitation at the Sentential Level

Table 5. Creative imitation used by Alex at the sentential level

Sentence Pattern/Structure	Line	Frequency
我是从.....的北方来的 (<i>I am from the north of ...</i>)	216	1
(.....) 有本土特色 (... <i>has its own unique/distinguishing characteristic</i>)	114	1
.....比较多 (... <i>be relatively bigger/greater in number/extent</i>)	370	1

Table 5 exhibits creative imitation at the sentential level generated by Alex. Creative imitation at the sentential level is indicated by FSA and PSA with CEC being involved. Alex constructed three different sentences with the following sentence patterns imitated from Hong's utterances. The elementary-level learner Inna did not creatively imitate any

sentence structure from Hong in this study.

4.1.4. Further Illustrations of the Use of Creative Imitation

In Excerpt 1, with utterance completion, Alex corrects his error in collocation by imitating Hong's expression. Alex and Hong here are talking about the special topography in Danxiashan geological park. Alex tries to describe the unique and strange looks of the mountains there with the adjective “崎岖” (rugged, bumpy, and winding), a Chinese word usually modifying mountain paths. In line 144, Alex pauses twice after uttering “山比较” (The mountains are kind of) and hurriedly murmuring to himself “‘特别’怎么说” (how do I say ‘special’). Then, he delivers the epithet “崎岖” in an abruptly falling intonation, shifting his eyes back to Hong with a smile. Also, a constellation of non-verbal behaviors, including his sideways glance and pause, evince Alex's solitary word search (Burch, 2014; M. Goodwin & C. Goodwin, 1986) as he frames his sentence. Line 144 therefore can be considered incomplete in that there is a mismatch between the modifier “崎岖” and the noun “山” (mountain). Following Hong's acknowledgment of his attempt as in “对” (right, yes) in line 145, he pairs “崎岖” with “山” to create the phrase “崎岖的山” (rugged, bumpy, and winding mountains) as shown in line 146. Despite the misuse, his effort to demonstrate his interpretation of the word “崎岖” is evident by creating this phrasal expression following his preceding talk. In response to him, Hong recasts (Lyster 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997) his phrase by replacing “崎岖” with “奇特” (unique, special, strange, uncommon) in his fashion of word formation (i.e., adj. + n.), thus noting Alex's inappropriate choice of words and providing him with corrective feedback. Thereupon, in line 148, Alex immediately notices that “奇特” should be the suitable wording by replying “对” twice with nods and his eyebrows raised in line 148 and then completes his inaccurate sentence in line 144 with the reformulated phrase “比较奇特” (kind of unique and strange), thus repairing his sentence (self-repair issuing from other-initiation; Schegloff et al., 1977) and calibrating his collocation by taking up that expression. This excerpt manifests the competent learner's use of creative imitation at the lexical level prompted by the native speaker's correction, bringing his learning and use of collocations in communicative interaction.

Excerpts 2-4 exhibit similar features. In Excerpt 2, to react to Hong's question that whether Alex likes the color blue in line 197, Alex, through content extension, gives his answer and specifies his opinion on that color in line 198 where he associates the word “抑郁” (depression, depressing, depressed) with blue. He elaborates that too much blue makes people depressed and blue is the color of depression. Similar to the aforementioned solitary word search, Alex here delivers the word “抑郁” with a string of gestures including upward glances and squeezing, shaking, and rotating his hands. Soon afterward, in line 199, Hong recapitulates Alex's words with “蓝色会让人心情没那么” (blue makes people less) and avails of a series of light hand gestures to invite him to continue talking. Accordingly, line 199 and her hand gestures not only reveal Hong's understanding of the competent learner's intention but make line 199 a designedly incomplete utterance (DIU; Koshik, 2002). Noticing Hong's aim, Alex, then, actively works with Hong by finishing her sentence with the generic word “不好” (bad, not good), attended by Hong's

utterance of “没那么欢快” (less cheerful). Recognizing Alex’s intended meaning and the subtle problem with his phraseology in line 198, Hong further extends the content and refines his diction by stating “(蓝色)容易让人有点忧郁” ((blue) tends to make people kind of melancholy) with the stressed articulation of the word “忧郁” (melancholy, glum, despondent) in line 203, which provides him with modified

input (Gass & Mackey, 2015). Eventually, after he notices the gap between his and Hong’s linguistic knowledge (Swain, 2000, 2015) and gives his assent to her repair (other-repair issuing from other-initiation; cf. Schegloff et al., 1977) as indicated in lines 204, 206, and 208, “忧郁” finds its way into Alex’s active vocabulary as evidenced by Excerpts 3-4.

Excerpt 1: *Rugged and winding mountains or unique and strange mountains?*

- a + GZ sideways, + head turns L, + raises eyebrows, + GZ at H, + smiles
- 144 A + 山比较 (.) 特别怎么说 (.) 崎岖↓.
- h + GZ at A
- 145 H [+ 对.
- a + GZ at H
- 146 A [+ 崎岖的山.
- h + raises head, + nods
- 147 H + 那个 (.) 奇特的形状.
- a + raises eyebrows, + nods
- 148 A [+ 奇 (.) 对, 对, 比较奇特.
- h + nods
- 149 H [+ 啊, 对, 对对.

Excerpt 2: *Blue makes people depressed or melancholy?*

- h + leans forward, + GZ at picture
- 197 I + 那你喜欢蓝色吗?
- a + GZ at picture, + reaches out and then squeezes RH slightly, + BHs on the table with palms down, + GZ at H
- 198 A 蓝色, 还: 行. 但是我觉得蓝色看多了会 (0.41) 会导致有点抑郁, 心里会有点抑郁.
+ 因为, 啊: 按照科学的研究, 啊: 蓝色和紫色, 特别是紫色, 是一种 (0.37) 比较沉闷↓的 (.) 啊: 比较抑郁↓种的颜色.
- h + GZ at A, + BHs up and down slightly and quickly
- 199 I + 蓝色会让人: 心情没那么,
- a + GZ at H, + moves body
- 200 A [+ 不好.
- h + GZ at A
- 201 I [+ 没那么欢快,
- a + GZ at H and then picture, + nods
- 202 A [+ 没那么好. 对, 对, 会让人产生,
- h + GZ at A
- 203 I [+ 啊, 容易让人有点忧郁↓.
- a + GZ at H, + RIF points at H and shakes quickly
- 204 A + 是, 是, 是.
- h + nods
- 205 I + 啊, 啊, 啊.
- a + GZ at H and then picture
- 206 A + 不是抑郁, 忧郁.
- h + nods, + GZ from A to picture
- 207 I + 对, 忧郁.
- a + nods, + GZ at picture
- 208 A + 忧郁, 特别特别忧郁.

In Excerpts 3-4, Alex showcases his use of creative imitation with the word “忧郁”. As the two interlocutors discuss the cramped space of the corner depicted in the picture, Alex extends the topic by setting forth that corners make people melancholy in lines 310 and 312. After two pauses, with an upward glance and certain hand gestures, he brings

the word “忧郁” into use to express his idea about corners. Moreover, in Excerpt 4, with more confidence and less time of thinking, he demonstrates his ability again to use that word, stating that Russians are the people of melancholy as demonstrated in line 538. In short, Excerpts 3-4 illustrate Alex’s L2 development—within dynamic contexts—in creatively using the vocabulary item which is first mentioned

by Hong in Excerpt 2 and is not a part of his active vocabulary bank.

Excerpt 3: *Melancholy* and *from the psychological perspective*

- h + GZ from picture to A, + BHs on table and apart, + stretches BHs
- 309 H + 哦, 嗯 (.) 你觉得会有点拥挤吗?
- a + BHs on table and apart, + stretches BHs, + GZ at picture, + LIF pints to picture, + BHs draw shape of corner, + GZ at H
- 310 A + 是, 是会拥挤, 而且 (0.44) 角落的那个 (0.37) 角落的概念,
- h + GZ at A, + nods
- 311 H + 啊.
- a + BHs draw shape of corner, + LIF up and down, + GZ upward and then at H
- 312 A + 还是 (0.69) 也是 (0.41) 有点忧郁的, 我觉得.
- h + GZ from A to picture, + nods
- 313 H + 哦.
- a + BHs draw shape of corner, + GZ at H and then upward
- 314 A + 心 (.) 看心 (.) 从心理,
- h + GZ at A
- 315 H + 心理学的角度.
- a + snaps LFs, + BHs draw shape of corner, + GZ from H to picture, + LIF points to picture, + GZ sideways and at H, + BHs up and rotate slightly, + snaps LFs, + BHs down on table
- 316 A + 学 (.) 对. 从心理学的角度 (.) 啊: 上来看, 啊: 一个 (0.33) 角落的 (.) 概念, 还是不怎么好.

Excerpt 4: People of *melancholy*

- + GZ at bottle, + RH reaches bottle to open its lid, + GZ upward with blinks, + presses mouth, + drinks water, + GZ at H
- + GZ at A
- 538 + 因为, 我们俄罗斯 (.) 我们俄罗斯民族, 我觉得是种 (.) 忧郁的民族. 我们不太会享受生活.

Excerpt 5: Chinese students have *more* pressure *than* their peers from other countries

- h + BHs hold picture, + GZ at A
- 359 H + 他们有很多这样的时间去做体育运动吗?
- a + leans forward, + GZ sideways and then at H
- 360 A + 比中国朋友更多.
- h + GZ at A, + nods
- 361 H + 比中国的学生要更多时间.
- a + GZ at H
- 362 A + 对, 对, 对, 对.
- h + GZ at A, + nods
- 363 H + 哦.
- a + GZ sideways and then H
- 364 A + 嗯呐, 因为中国 (0.39) 重 (0.68) 中国太重视学习.
- h + GZ at A, + nods
- 365 H + 对, 对, 对.
- a + GZ at H, + LIF touches nose and face, + pushes LHs forward and backward on table, + GZ from table to sideways to H
- 366 A + 过 (.) 过分↓, 太过分↓. 你从 (.) 因为你从 (0.47) 国外的角度来看, 中国的啊: 这个 (.) 太重视.
- h + GZ at A, + pushes BHs forward and backward above table
- 367 H + 就是他们的学习任务比较多, [比你们多很多.
- a + GZ from sideways to H, + shakes body slightly
- 368 A [+ 更多, 更多.
- h + GZ at A, + nods
- 369 H + 哦, 更多.
- a + GZ at H and then sideways and back to H, + shakes body slightly
- 370 A + 学习压力比他们比较多, 你们的学习压力比较多.

In Excerpt 5, Alex reuses the phrase first appearing in Excerpt 3 and fixes his sentence by aligning it to Hong's

utterance. Alex and Hong here start to converse about Chinese students' pressure. To extend the conversation, Alex makes a

comparison between the attitude toward study from China and from the rest of the world. This time, with his hand gestures identical to the one he deploys in Excerpt 3 when mentioning the word “角落” (corner) and “角度” (perspective), he adopts the phrase “从……角度” (from ... point of view, from the perspective of ...) prompted by Hong in Excerpt 3 to translate his thought into words by constructing the phrase “从国外的角度来看” (from the standpoint of people outside China, compared with the rest of the world) in line 366. Motivated by Hong’s content extension in line 367 claiming that Chinese students’ homework is much more than students in other countries, he continues her idea by remarking that Chinese students have more pressure than their peers from other countries as demonstrated in line 370 where he aligns his sentence structure with Hong’s one in line 367 to repair the syntactical problem (self-repair issuing from self-initiation; cf. Schegloff et al., 1977) following his ungrammatical “trial run”. In this way, with creative imitation, he arrives at the correct form and usage of the target structure. To conclude, this Excerpt again demonstrates that creative

imitation intimately pairs language learning with use within multidimensional contexts and remedies language errors.

As regards the beginning learner’s performance in dialogue with Hong, Inna’s use of creative imitation—though with much more struggle and less frequency—manifests certain traits much the same as those from Alex. Excerpt 6 shows Hong’s role to help Inna express herself where Inna picks “如果” (if) in line 142 from Hong’s words in line 141 to solve her difficulty expressing her idea and anxiety signaled by her repetitions, repairs, restarts, long pauses, as well as a series of motions and eye movements in line 140. Then, in Excerpt 7, with content extension, Inna actively uses the word “如果” in line 220 to form a conditional clause continuing her idea generation after Hong repairs Inna’s false collocation “坐自行车” in line 216 with the correct one “骑自行车” (ride a bicycle) in line 217. In short, creative imitation used by the beginner expedite her production by language scaffolding. Excerpts 10-11 further emphasize that creative imitation facilitates language learning and use and allows the close coupling of language learning and use within rich contexts.

Excerpt 6: *If*

- i + GZ at picture, + nods, + RH swipes above picture, + raises BHs to ears
+ puts RH at height of chest with palm down, + shakes RH, + GZ upward
- 140 I + 在这里, 在这个房间: 里面, 在 (1.55) 啊:
+ 房间里 (1.02) 这个画看起来好, 但是我不喜欢.
- h + GZ from picture to I, + sticks BHs on table, + BHs down, + nods
- 141 H + 就是, 如果问你 | 喜不喜欢的话,
- i + GZ at picture, + LH on picture, + RIF points to picture and taps
+ GZ sideways, + reaches out BHs like hanging picture
- 142 I | + 但是, 如果在我的房间,
+ 我想 (.) 啊
- h + GZ at I, + leans forward,
- 143 H + 会挂这样一幅画.
- i + LH on back of neck, + RH at height of nose and on back of neck, + GZ at picture, + nods
- 144 I + 对对对.

Excerpt 7: *Ride a bicycle and if there were less people*

- i + GZ upward, + LIF sticks out, + GZ down, + moves LH back and forth, + lifts, clenches and rotates BHs, + GZ at H
- 216 I + 大夫山, 因为在那里可以 (0.39) 坐: 自行车.
- h + GZ at I, + nods
- 217 H + 嗯. 骑自行车.
- i + BHs down on table, + GZ at picture + waves LH, + nods, + lifts RH slightly, + BHs down on table
+ GZ upward and then at H, + frowns
- 218 I + 嗯, 很喜欢. 嗯, 对对, 对对, 对对对, 骑自行车, 我很喜欢.
+ 同时, 有时候在那里很多人,
- h + GZ at I, + nods
- 219 H + 嗯.
- i + GZ from H to picture, + lifts BHs slightly, + shakes LH, + GZ at H and upward, + BHs down on table, + nods
- 220 I + 不太舒服, 但是 (0.50) 如果, 没有很多人, 嗯 (0.46) 很喜欢.

4.2. Language Proficiency Influencing the Use of Creative Imitation

A positive correlation exists between language proficiency and the use of creative imitation. L2 learners must make full use of their language knowledge to understand the native speaker’s words and thus effectively use creative imitation and deal with contingencies and situations—such as temporary difficulties in language—that may arise in interaction.

In terms of the frequency and diversity of the use of creative imitation, as Tables 2-6 illustrate, Alex the expert

resorts to creative imitation much more often than Inna the novice does in the interactional data and his use is more diverse than that of Inna. As Tables 2 and 3 indicate, there are disparities between Alex’s and Inna’s use of creative imitation at the lexical level. Alex the expert assimilated seven words from Hong the native speaker’s discourses to convey his ideas in the interactional data. Conversely, Inna the novice only borrowed one word. Particularly, Alex employed the word “忧郁” three times on different topics and the words “单调” as well as “地毯” twice while Inna used the word “如果” twice in her utterances. In terms of creation imitation at the phrasal level, as is demonstrated in Tables 4 and 5, Alex took

up four phrases from Hong to aid his idea generation and while Inna picked two. With regard to creative imitation at the sentential level, Alex adopted three sentence structures; however, Inna did not imitate any sentence from the native speaker to aid her language production. Correspondingly, with the relatively frequent and diverse use of creative imitation in Alex's discourse, creative imitation by Alex is embedded in various topics via *xu* and is more complex than that by Inna. In Excerpts 2-9, Alex used various imitated linguistic forms to converse with Hong about the topics from mountains to decorations to Russians to pressures on Chinese students and he usually produced relatively longer sentences containing detailed messages. In contrast, Inna's use of creative imitation remained relatively simple and usually appeared in sentence fragments. Overall, Alex conveyed his messages with creative imitation more precisely, coherently, and appropriately than Inna did.

Therefore, higher language proficiency has a bearing on a higher frequency and quality of the use of creative imitation. Higher language proficiency enables a better understanding of varying messages in the discursive practices and brings about better production containing creative imitation.

5. Discussion

The data and analysis presented in this empirical study echo that creative imitation figures as a catalyst for language learning and use, which allows creative use of language through imitation while aiding L2 learners' use of newly encountered linguistic items.

First, creative imitation inherent in *xu* motivates learners to render their ideas by completing and extending the preceding contents and thus maps static linguistic forms onto dynamic idea expression, thereby calling forth the synchrony of language learning and use. As all the Excerpts above show, while the two CSL learners continued the conversation with the native speaker, they to different degrees aligned with the native speaker, thereby assimilating various linguistic structures into their idea expression. *Xu* engages L2 learners in dynamic, contextualized, and meaning-focused interaction—a favorable site exposing learners to L2 input—for idea exchange and pilots their language output after the learners comprehend the input from their interlocutors of higher proficiency with an array of ambient variables (e.g., context, cognitive and emotional states, and environmental affordances) as an auxiliary. The native speaker's speech functions as linguistic stimuli for L2 learners in that the comprehension of the native speaker's input promotes learners to perceive and imitate how the native speaker constructs the target language and put it into their extended output. Alignment concomitant with interaction is henceforth stimulated, manifesting itself in the repetition of linguistic forms originating from the native speaker in L2 learners' idea expression. Beneath the repetition is the adaptation of linguistic representations, contributing to language learning in discursive practices where learners' language experience is translated into their mental representations with interactive alignment drawing a connection between the two. The process in which the learners creatively use the imitated linguistic structures intimately couples language learning with use in contexts teeming with dynamic ideas. Therefore, in communicative interaction mobilizing learners' agency, the synthesis of the incomplete static input of linguistic constructions and the extended dynamic output containing those constructions turbocharges language learning and use

(Wang, 2021). Since creative imitation essentially mounts linguistic forms in idea creation during interaction, it welds language learning and use into a unified whole, thus learning efficiency is guaranteed.

Second, creative imitation roots language use in multidimensional contexts, enhancing the congruency between language forms and contextual variables, such that the linguistic structures learned can be readily activated or primed for use once similar situations arise. Some SLA scholars implied that learners are more likely to recall what they have learned in case the retrieval settings are comparable or identical to the conditions of learning (Larsen-Freeman, 2013). The data fit that description. In Excerpts 3-4, the word “忧郁” from the native speaker's input was taken up and creatively used by the competent CSL learner to describe certain colors, objects, and characters that he deems lugubrious. Likewise, the word “单调” was retrieved to depict colors lacking brightness, decorations lacking interest, and patterns lacking variation. Also, in Excerpt 3, the competent CSL learner absorbed the phrase “从.....的角度” from Hong to make comparisons and explanations. In Excerpts 6-7, the beginner in like manner took the conditional conjunction “如果” into her utterances introducing her suppositions. As is illustrated, linguistic forms get contextually marked as interaction unfolds, which aids in retrieving the forms for expressive purposes. That is also in line with Ellis' (2006) contention stating that “language learning involves the acquisition of constructions that map linguistic form and function” (p. 100), which accentuates that language learning should be context-bound. As the L2 constructions are primed for use, creative imitation establishes robust, intimate links between the constructions and their contextual meanings and usage, which also makes learning and practice happen in proximity. In addition, our data confirm that frequent activation of a linguistic form in idea expression makes that process more automatic, for creative imitation is able to foster accurate, fluent, and spontaneous use of that target structure by engaging learners in communication-oriented meaning making. In general, creative imitation forges form-meaning mapping through contextualization and advances appropriate retrieval and use of the forms previously imitated.

Third, creative imitation reduces language misuse through modeling and forwards idea generation by scaffolding, thereby smoothing over the asymmetry between comprehension and production. The minute L2 learners experience language difficulties or commit errors, the native speaker's language constitutes a model or authentic language repository to which the L2 learners can refer. Several Excerpts serve as an illustration. In Excerpts 1 and 7, the two CSL learners' creative imitation was triggered by the native speaker's repair. In Excerpts 3, after running into language difficulties, the two learners imitated the language constructions in the native speaker's utterances to articulate their idea. In Excerpts 3-4, creative imitation by the competent CSL learner expedited his production with the native speaker's repair in Excerpt 2 functioning as an authentic model. Similarly, creative imitation also scaffolded the learner's speech employing the expression from Hong in Excerpt 5. Moreover, the competent CSL learner reformulated his sentence on the model of Hong's utterance. When L2 learners generate their idea in target language, they may perceive what they know and what they are unable to produce. That is, prompted by the native speaker's input, learners begin to notice the gap between the problematic

aspects of their interlanguage and the target language. Then, the gap is filled either by taking up native speakers' repair to remedy their output or by borrowing native speakers' linguistic structures to mitigate language processing burdens. As the gap is being filled through *xu* or creative imitation, alignment works: the moment L2 learners assign the native speaker's expressions to their meaning creation, comprehension exercises its positive influence on production, thereby spurring comprehension and production to converge on a dynamic state of parity. What has been learned in the preceding discourse is able to scaffold the follow-up language production. Thus, creative imitation lubricates L2 learners' idea delivery and improves their performance when they practice the target language by making comprehension interact with production and accordingly bridges the gap between the two asymmetric abilities.

To conclude, capitalizing on the asymmetry between comprehension and production, creative imitation marries linguistic imitation with content creation and deeply consolidates static language knowledge and dynamic language use, which enables learners to dynamically accommodate changes in meaning creation, implying they are learning to unleash their "meaning potential" (Halliday, 1973) within dynamic and contextualized interaction to achieve L2 development instead of simply taking up static linguistic forms. It innately entails the learning of linguistic forms within specific contexts, fusing language learning and use into an indivisible, solid continuum.

6. Conclusion

Through the CA perspective on the communicative interaction, this study sets out to investigate in a fine-grained way the use of creative imitation by an advanced-level CSL speaker and an elementary-level CSL speaker in their L2 interaction with a native Chinese speaker. The present study also inspects how language proficiency and some other contributing elements affect the use of creative imitation. The major findings are summarized as follows:

Firstly, the study reveals that creative imitation in L2 talks closely couples language learning with use and reinforces form-context mapping; it reduces language errors through modeling and facilitates idea generation by scaffolding, thereby ironing out the comprehension-production asymmetry.

Secondly, some elements—including language proficiency, identity, and background knowledge—play a role in the use of creative imitation in L2 continuation talks. According to the results, higher language proficiency correlates with greater frequency and quality of the use of creative imitation. Also, identity and background knowledge have an influence on its use.

Although the present study provides empirical evidence demonstrating the use of creative imitation in L2 talks, there are some unavoidable limitations. Some of the limitations and possible avenues for future research are discussed below. Given the focus on only two cases, the generalizability of our findings to other cases remains to be tested with additional data. Future studies should involve L2 learners from various backgrounds and with different experiences in L2 continuation talks. Also, future research should analyze the interactional data in a deeper and more fine-grained way to further fathom the minutiae of creative imitation and better examine how various elements affect creative imitation in conversational settings.

In addition, there is no longitudinal study in the research design. The facilitative effects on L2 learning brought by creative imitation in this communicative interaction may be temporary and it is still unknown whether creative imitation in L2 talks may lead to L2 development in the long run. Therefore, longitudinal studies of L2 learners' use of creative imitation and their improvement in L2 proficiency level should be included in future research to further investigate its characters and effects and in turn to bring its benefits into full play.

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