

# INTERACTIVE ALIGNMENT:

## What's in it for language teachers?

By Pavel Trofimovich, Kim McDonough, and Sara Kennedy

Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

It should come as no surprise to anyone that people repeat themselves. We repeat words and even entire phrases for emphasis. And we repeat our own words and grammatical structures without realizing that we're doing it. When we talk to other people, we often repeat their utterances, such as when we don't understand them or when we want to agree with them. This tendency for people to repeat each other's language has implications for how second language learners interact with each other and what they can learn from those interactions. In this paper, we explore whether second language speakers repeat each other's speech while interacting, and if teachers can take advantage of this repetition for teaching.

Perhaps the most surprising fact about linguistic repetition is its frequency. Besides repeating each other's words and phrases, which we often become aware of as conversations continue, we also repeat aspects of speech that are less noticeable, such as grammatical structures, intonation, and specific details of individual sounds. The excerpt in Box 1 illustrates repetition in an authentic conversation between two bank robbers (Schenkein, 1980).

### **Box 1. An example of repetition in language.**

A: Cor, the noise downstairs, you've got to hear it and witness it to realize how bad it is.

B: You have got to experience exactly the same position as me, mate, to understand how I feel.

This excerpt, drawn from a longer interchange recorded by a ham radio operator, features Speaker A, who was located underground as he and his accomplices were tunnelling through a basement to reach safety deposit boxes inside a bank vault, and Speaker B, who was a lookout placed on the roof of a building overlooking the bank. As the robbers compared their grievances, they re-used each other's language, including common words, phrases, as well as similar grammatical and rhythmic structures. This type of repetition is not just a feature of conversations occurring under dramatic circumstances. Common, daily interactions are filled with similar repetition at the level of words, phrases, grammar, and pronunciation.

If repetition is so pervasive in everyday interaction, then what functions might it serve? One possibility suggested by social psychologists is that speakers use repetition to show their (often subconscious) desire to integrate with interlocutors. Repeating one another's language makes people appear more similar, which helps promote mutual solidarity and understanding. Social psychologists have identified a number of speech characteristics that speakers seem to use (implicitly or overtly) to promote social integration. For example, we tend to produce language with similar utterance lengths, speech rate, volume, and pausing frequencies. In addition to repeating language, we also repeat each other's gestures. We tend to like interlocutors more if they mirror our body postures and gestures, such as leaning to one side, touching the face, or moving a foot. It's been suggested that imitating an interlocutor's behaviour helps social bonding.

Researchers in the field of cognitive psychology, however, have proposed that the function of repetition is to help people achieve common understanding. According to this view, we establish "common ground" with our interlocutors by matching their language at the level of words, grammar, and pronunciation. By aligning our language use with our interlocutors, we can understand each other more quickly and easily. We align ourselves at different levels of language, such as word choice, pronunciation, and grammar, with alignment at one level facilitating alignment at another level. Box 2 illustrates this idea of using interactive alignment to achieve common understanding in a cooperative maze game, where speakers were asked, without seeing each other's materials, to figure out where they are located in the maze (Garrod & Anderson, 1987). This example shows the interlocutors' speech on the left and the approximate position being described marked by an arrow on the right. Speakers A and B re-use each other's words and phrases and follow the same rhythmic patterns, such as *along from the bottom* or *in the second box*, to quickly zero in on each other's location. It is this repetition of language that, according to researchers, helps interlocutors establish common understanding quickly and efficiently.



When we looked at their conversations more closely, we noticed that they repeated language in ways very similar to native speakers, as shown in the excerpt in Box 3. These learners are exchanging information about one of the pictures in the story task. They re-used common words such as *gentleman* and *assume*, and also repeated common structures, including relative clauses (*the guy who lost...*) and prepositional phrases (*the gentleman/policeman with...*). When we asked the raters to describe what aspects of speech made the learners sound similar, they mentioned linguistic features such as fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. They also pointed to nonverbal behaviors such as smiling, hand gestures, nodding, eye contact, posture, voice volume, eye gaze, and features of interactive style including interruptions, backchannels, and comprehension checks. In sum, our study found that second language learners engage in interactive alignment of verbal and non-verbal behaviours, just as native speakers do.



Figure 2. Picture narration task prompt.

### Box 3. Alignment between second language learners.

- A: So, one is policeman, one is thief, and another guy is a the guy who lost his wallet.
- B: The third one the third one is a... I don't know maybe he's the guy who lost... Maybe maybe...
- A: Yeah, yeah. Just, just assume this...
- B: He's a gentleman, he has a...
- A: Yeah okay. We can assume he's the guy who lost his wallet. The third one...
- B: Yeah, yeah, that's right. The third one. Yeah. This guy the gentleman...
- A: The gentleman is it same gentleman with the...
- B: Yeah, the same gentleman, yeah. The same gentleman. And the same gentleman with the he ring the bell...
- A: The gentlemen glasses
- B: Yeah with glasses, right.
- A: With the green t-shirt...
- B: Yes. good. And he...
- A: And the policeman with the police... suit, right?
- B: Yeah.

Having shown that alignment occurs during conversations between second language learners, we then asked whether it might be a useful teaching tool in language classrooms. Many classrooms are socially, educationally, and linguistically diverse, and learners often possess different linguistic knowledge, progress through learning at different rates, and understand language in different ways. These differences might prevent learners from “aligning” with their interlocutors, in which case alignment could not be used as a teaching tool.

To explore the pedagogical applications of alignment, we created theme-based information-exchange activities for university students enrolled in an English for academic purposes class (McDonough, Neumann, & Trofimovich, in press; Trofimovich, McDonough, & Foote, 2014; Trofimovich, McDonough, & Neumann, 2013). In these activities, we included multiple instances of three grammatical forms, which were passives, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and two pronunciation patterns, which were three- and four-syllable English academic words with the stress on the second syllable (e.g., *conSIDer*, *inTElligent*). We wanted to know if the students were sensitive to their interlocutor’s use of these forms. Put simply, if the students were aligning, they would produce more target forms after their interlocutor used one than they did when their interlocutor did not use them. And this is precisely what we observed. Across several tasks administered throughout a 13-week course, the students used a target form most often when they had just heard their interlocutor produce that same form.

Box 4 illustrates alignment in stress patterns between two students who were discussing misconceptions about children’s health. Student B produced an accurate stress pattern in the word *asSUMption* immediately after he heard Student A produce the same stress pattern in the word *deTECTed*. What’s noteworthy here is that alignment occurred at the level of an underlying stress pattern, that is, a three-syllable word with a major stress on the second syllable. In fact, this kind of alignment—as opposed to, for example, a simple repetition of the same word or the same relative clause—was most frequent in our data.

**Box 4. Alignment during second language classroom activities.**

A: Depression is often deTECTed among teens with stable families, many friends, and appreciate (“appropriate”) social behaviours. These teenagers hold their depression until sym... symptoms became extremely sever (“severe”).

B: B: Many people have the asSUMption that extra weight caused by stripping... err... skipping breakfast.

A: A: True?

B: B: Yes, true.

One pedagogical implication is that collaborative tasks seeded with targeted grammar or pronunciation patterns can provide students with production practice opportunities. With respect to stress patterns in academic words, each student produced about 11 to 15 words per task, and heard his or her partner say an equivalent number of words. This amounts to sizeable exposure to the target stress pattern during a 10–15 minute activity where learners were not intentionally focusing on word stress at all, and were simultaneously receiving practice opportunities for other English skills, such as fluency development, vocabulary, and question formation. This means that even if alignment does not occur, students may still receive ample opportunities to practice target language forms in a communicative setting.

## **Pedagogical implications and conclusion**

If linguistic repetition is indeed a basic feature of human communication, then what can interactive alignment offer to second language teaching? The answer to this question requires a more precise understanding of what underlies alignment. More research needs to be carried out to identify exactly how alignment happens, but one finding is clear: alignment is both a social and a cognitive phenomenon at the heart of human interaction. It may be premature to suggest definitive applications to teaching, but several possibilities come to mind. First, learners might benefit from awareness-raising activities that will sensitize them to the fact that successful interaction often involves a lot of repetition. Learners might find it useful to be exposed to activities featuring authentic spoken interaction, for instance, through watching excerpts from popular television shows, in order to become aware of repetition at the level of words, grammar, and pronunciation. This may help them become more sensitive to how they can use repetition to construct successful interactions.

Second, if we adopt the alignment view, then communicative activities specifically targeting linguistic forms hold some promise for teaching. This includes collaborative classroom-based activities designed to elicit alignment towards target grammar and pronunciation patterns (as opposed to convergence on common errors), as well as tasks built around high-frequency, functional language patterns. This also includes activities featuring corrective feedback and especially recasts (defined as teachers' reformulations of learner errors). Recasts function as repeated models to which learners could align if they are given the chance to respond to the recasts.

Third, one assumption is that alignment is greatest when it occurs at several levels of language simultaneously, such as when a repeated pronunciation feature co-occurs with a repeated grammatical form. We can also hypothesize that when language patterns are experienced concurrently across several modalities (speech and text) and sensory channels (eyes and ears), alignment should be enhanced. For example, the effects of alignment in teaching/learning activities might be increased by presenting information both orally and visually, or by using facial expressions and gestures to accompany language.

Finally, alignment implies that different kinds of imitation activities—such as silent mouthing, mirroring, echoing, shadowing, as well as dramatic imitation techniques that involve imitating gestures, facial expressions, and affect—may be particularly useful in helping learners align to target models. Such imitation activities need not involve meaningless, drill-like repetition. Instead, interactive alignment suggests that meaningful contextualized repetition-based collaborative activities can be a useful addition to the tasks learners and teachers already use in their classrooms.

So what's in interactive alignment for teachers, after all? While a lot more needs to be learned, one conclusion is obvious: interactive alignment is a useful framework to explain some of the complexities of second language development. It can be used by teachers to develop or refine communicative activities in order to take full advantage of the linguistic repetition that is all around us.

## Further Reading on Interactive Alignment

- Garrod, S., & Pickering, M. J. (2009). Joint action, interactive alignment, and dialog. *Topics in Cognitive Science*, 1, 292–304.
- Giles, H., & Ogay, T. (2007). Communication Accommodation Theory. In B. B. Whaley & W. Santer (Eds.), *Explaining communication: Contemporary theories and exemplars* (pp. 293–309). London: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Pickering, M. J. (2006). The dance of dialogue. *The Psychologist*, 19, 734-737.

## References

- Garrod, S., & Anderson, A. (1987). Saying what you mean in dialogue: A study in conceptual and semantic co-ordination. *Cognition*, 27, 181–218. doi:10.1016/0010-0277(87)90018-7
- McDonough, K., Neumann, H., & Trofimovich, P. (in press). Eliciting production of L2 target structures through collaborative priming activities. *Canadian Modern Language Review*.
- Schenkein, J. (1980). A taxonomy for repeating action sequences in natural conversation. In B. Butterworth (Ed.), *Language production* (pp. 21–47). London: Academic Press.
- Trofimovich, P., & Kennedy, S. (2014). Interactive alignment between bilingual interlocutors: Evidence from two information-exchange tasks. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*. doi:10.1017/S1366728913000801
- Trofimovich, P., McDonough, K., & Foote, J. (2014). Interactive alignment of multisyllabic stress patterns in a second language classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*. doi:10.1002/tesq.156
- Trofimovich, P., McDonough, K., & Neumann, H. (2013). Using collaborative tasks to elicit auditory and structural priming. *TESOL Quarterly*, 47, 177–186. doi:10.1002/tesq.78