

# APPEALS FOR ASSISTANCE AND INCORPORATION OF FEEDBACK IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE INTERACTION: THE ROLE OF AGE AND PROFICIENCY LEVEL

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## 1. Introduction

In their approach to the learning of a second language (L2), learners make use of a range of strategies that help them in that process. Some of those strategies aim primarily at internalizing and automatizing new L2 knowledge (i.e., learning strategies), whereas others aim at using the L2 in communication (i.e. L2-use strategies). Communication strategies (CSs) can be defined as a subset of L2-use strategies that L2 learners employ when confronted with problematic items and/or rules which are not part of their linguistic knowledge or which are temporarily inaccessible or unretrievable (Manchón 1998).

One of the CSs that L2 learners may resort to is the *appeal for assistance*, defined by Faerch and Kasper (1983) as a cooperative compensatory strategy which typically involves turning to an external source (e.g., speech partner, dictionary) to look for a solution. Learners may appeal for assistance when they experience a problem in production or in comprehension. *Appeals for assistance* are usually regarded as a type of CS when they involve problems in L2 production. When they involve problems in L2 comprehension, they are studied within the field of interactional modifications (e.g., Long 1983).

Although *appeals for assistance* are considered as one of the least risk-taking strategies of all (Corder 1983) and even though they do not involve an

autonomous solution by the learner, they are seen as beneficial from the point of view of acquisition for their learning potential by making items available for incorporation when there is a need for them (Faerch and Kasper 1980). Willey (2002) argues that this particular CS serves several purposes in vocabulary acquisition. By means of *appeals for assistance*, learners may recall known words, elicit unknown ones, and test hypotheses about word usage (Willey 2002). *Appeals for assistance* also help acquisition indirectly by sustaining discourse and providing further opportunities for output and, as Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) claim, input. Finally, from a social point of view, as Corder (1983) argues, saying something in face-to-face interaction is usually as important as saying what one would like to say.

The learning potential of *appeals for assistance* is closely linked to the concept of attention, a crucial mechanism in the learning process (Schmidt and Frota's 1986 "notice-the-gap" hypothesis). Awareness, distinguished by Schmidt (2001) from metalinguistic awareness on the assumption that awareness refers to instances of language at a surface level rather than to abstract rules or principles, involves noticing gaps in one's interlanguage (IL) abilities as a prior step to attempting a solution. According to Schmidt (2001), the role of consciousness, which he studies through the theoretical construct of attention, is essential for learning from input to take place and for becoming aware of mismatches between ends and means in language production. Swain further distinguished three levels of noticing depending on whether the L2 learner noticed *a form* in the target language (TL), "noticing the form", *an IL/TL difference*, "noticing the gap", or *an IL deficiency*, "noticing the hole". (1998:66-67). *Appeals for assistance* preempt attention to *an IL deficiency* and elicit a response move on the part of the interlocutor, conditions that may facilitate acquisition, especially if the learner incorporates the help provided by the interlocutor in subsequent moves.

Research on CSs claims that proficiency level plays a role in strategy use by determining the frequency of use of achievement strategies (vs. avoidance strategies) and of L2-based (vs. L1-based) strategies (e.g., Fernández Dobao 2001). However, situational and individual factors may interact with proficiency level (Faerch 1984). Whereas Liang and Llobera (1999) found that Chinese learners in a naturalistic context did not use strategies based on their L1, both Celaya (1992) and Bou (1993) observed that the most frequent strategies used by foreign language (FL) learners were *language switch* and *appeal for assistance*. This shows the influence of the interactional context, particularly the fact that the interlocutor shares the learners' L1, in strategy choice. Apart from that overall tendency, Celaya (1992) also found differences in the use of CSs by learners of different proficiency levels. Low-proficiency learners often remained silent, thus leaving all responsibility for sustaining conversation to their interlocutor. The

greater the language proficiency of the learners, the greater their proficiency in their use of strategies, among them *appeals for assistance*. According to Celaya (1992), this made communication flow more fluently and naturally.

Piazza (1998) also found that the FL beginners in her study were not always determined to find a solution to their production/comprehension problems by appealing to their interlocutor. She reports a higher frequency of hesitation phenomena in the beginners' interaction and a greater determination to negotiate meaning in the intermediate and advanced learners. These learners were also observed to work actively on the responses provided to their *appeals for assistance* by interpreting and using them autonomously.

Apart from situational variables interacting with proficiency level, individual variables such as age may also have an effect on the use of CSs. In the field of interactional modifications, Scarcella and Higa (1982) report that the adolescent learners in their study were more actively involved in conversation. They hypothesized that it was that greater involvement, manifest in how they sought for explanations when they did not understand and in the extra work they did to sustain discourse, which contributed to their faster development. Muñoz (2003) examined the interaction of learners of different ages and proficiency levels performing an interview in the L3 and concluded that the frequency of interactional modifications in each group was in part an effect of the interactional skills of the participants. She observed that older learners avoided silences to a greater extent than their younger counterparts when they ran into comprehension problems.

In view of the role that age and proficiency level may play in the nature of FL interaction, this study sets out to explore how EFL learners of different ages and proficiency levels negotiate meaning by appealing for assistance when they run into production problems. It specifically asks whether there are any quantitative differences in the amount of help that learners of different ages and proficiency levels appeal for, whether there are any qualitative differences in how that help is appealed for and, finally, whether there are any differences in the learners' reaction to the help provided by their interlocutor.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Participants**

The oral performance of three groups of 30 EFL learners each was examined for this study (N=90). These learners came from two different school curricula: one of the groups, Group B-12, from a former school curriculum and the other two

groups, Group A-12 and C-10, from the present school curriculum. At the moment of data collection they had received a different amount of instruction calculated in hours, as shown in Table 1. The learners were randomly selected from a larger research project on the age factor in the acquisition of English as a foreign language (*BAF Project*) currently in progress at the University of Barcelona.<sup>1</sup>

Time 1 200 hours	<b>Group C-10</b> 10.9 years N=30	<b>Group B-12</b> 12.9 years N=30
Time 2 416 hours	<b>Group A-12</b> 12.9 years N=30	

TABLE 1: Participants

The labels for each group (A, B and C) correspond to their mean scores on a series of written tests<sup>2</sup> and they are ordered in decreasing level of performance (see Table 2):

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GROUP	AGE	N	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION
A (416hrs)	12.9	30	14.35	3.58
B (200hrs)	12.9	30	9.09	3.34
C (200hrs)	10.9	30	6.68	2.00

TABLE 2: Proficiency level

The difference in performance across the three groups yielded statistical significance in a one-way analysis of variance (*ANOVA*),  $F=48.32 (2, 86)$ ,  $p<.001$ , and the *Scheffé post-hoc test* showed that the means of the three groups differed significantly from one another ( $p<.05$ ). This difference in performance allows us to explore the role of proficiency level in the use of *appeals for assistance*. On the other hand, the fact that Groups A-12 and B-12 have different proficiency levels but share the same age provides an interesting intersection that can be used to explore the role of age.

## 2.2. Task and procedure

The participants carried out a narration task in which they were asked to tell the story depicted in a set of six pictures to an interviewer (researcher) with both participants having visual access to the pictures being described. Seven female researchers took part in administering and audiorecording the task.

### **2.2.1. *The picture story narration as task***

The picture story narration, according to Long's (1990) classification of tasks, is a closed task in which learners are required to produce a predetermined right solution. According to Long (1990), this type of task produces more negotiation work than open tasks in which production is free, because participants feel constrained to keep on with a topic even when trouble arises. The fact that participants cannot drop a topic so easily may foster the use of CSs, among them *appeals for assistance*. In fact, studies on CSs rely largely on closed tasks (e.g., Hyde 1982; Chen 1990).

However, the narration is typically a one-way task with a structure in which exchange of information is not required for successful completion. It is a task intended to elicit a monologue from the student. Long (1990) claims that from the point of view of negotiation work this structure is not as effective as that of two-way tasks. Nevertheless, the presence of an expert participant and certain participant-related factors such as age and proficiency level may have an influence on the nature of interaction. In an analysis of the role of the interviewer in the narratives of learners of different ages and proficiency levels, Álvarez (2002) observed a co-construction of meaning that made the narration turn into a somewhat different task. This suggests that the narration task, as a result of participant-related factors, may share features of two-way tasks with the interviewer actively involved in the interaction. The interviewer can be seen as having access to information that the learner may require at some point to complete the task, especially linguistic information as a result of her near-native-like L2 competence. In this sense, although the learner has no exclusive access to information, s/he may turn to his or her interlocutor to ask for help. The learner will do so on a cooperative basis triggering learner-initiated negotiation episodes as a consequence of communication breakdowns due to problems in production. The interviewer may also participate in interviewer-initiated episodes prompting and focusing the learner's attention to relevant pieces of information in plot development to carry out the task successfully. This in turn may lead to potential communication breakdowns due to problems in comprehension.

## **2.3. Categories of analysis**

### **2.3.1. *Interviewees' appeals for assistance***

The different categories of *appeals for assistance* are based on Faerch and Kasper's (1984) distinction between *direct appeals*, on the one hand, and *implicit* and *explicit signals of uncertainty*, on the other, all of which, they argue, can be interpreted as *appeals for assistance* from the interlocutor's point of view.

a) **Direct appeals**

This is asking the interlocutor directly for help to either through an explicit question or through rising intonation.

E.g. (Group A-12): S1: boy and a girl i com es diu “menjar”? (Catalan: how do you say “to eat”?)

E.g. (Group B-12): S2: is a drink hmm “nens” “nens”? (Cat.: “children”)

b) **Indirect appeals**

This is asking for help indirectly. Two types of *indirect appeals* are distinguished depending on their explicitness and the degree of obligation they impose on the interlocutor to assist:

**Explicit indirect appeals** correspond to Beneke’s (1975) *handicap signals* or Palmberg’s (1979) *admission of ignorance*. They express lack of a needed L2 item in a verbal way.

E.g. (Group B-12): S3: the children “preparan” no sé com es diu (Cat.: “prepare” I don’t know how to say that).

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**Implicit indirect appeals** correspond to different types of hesitation phenomena (e.g. pauses, repeats, draws) which function as nonverbal problem indicators that may be interpreted as *appeals for assistance* by the interlocutor.<sup>3</sup> This category has been extended in this study to include learner silences, which may have the same effect on the interlocutor as the different types of hesitation phenomena.

E.g. (Group C-10): S4: looking looking at... (unfinished utterance)  
Interviewer: what’s this?

E.g. (Group B-12): S5: the cows eating hmm...  
Interviewer: what are they eating? What is this?  
S5: (silence)  
Interviewer: grass grass plants yeah?

2.3.2. *Interviewers’ responses to appeals for assistance*

The interviewer categories are data-based and respond to the two alternatives open to the interviewers when faced with learners’ problem indicators, either to attempt to supply the L2 item/s needed by the learner or avoid supplying them.

The interviewers’ response moves are understood as being triggered by learner self-initiation as opposed to interviewer-initiation (e.g., provision of corrective feedback), that is, the learner is the one who first indicates the presence of a problem.

**a) Direct response**

The interlocutor provides the L2 items/s that the learner is having trouble with.

- E.g. (Group C-10): S6: hmm “menjant” com has dit que era? (Cat.: “eating” how did you say that was?)  
Interviewer: eat.  
S6: eat the dog s’ha menjat el sandwich. (Cat.: has eaten the)

**b) Avoidance of direct response**

The interlocutor avoids supplying the L2 item/s that the learner is having trouble with but attempts to elicit further learner performance. Three main types of avoidance of a direct response to the learners’ problem indicators have been identified in the data. All of them can be seen as indirect ways of assisting the learner. Two of them leave the source of trouble intact and the third ignores it.

**Question elicitation** involves leaving unaddressed the sources of the trouble that triggered the learner’s *appeal* while attempting to reach a solution from the learner by means of eliciting questions.

- E.g. (Group A-12): S7: the cows eating hmm...  
Interviewer: what are they eating? What is this?

**Encouraging** involves leaving unaddressed the sources of the trouble that triggered the learner’s *appeal* while encouraging the learner to reach a solution by means of acknowledging, by repeating the last words of the learner’s previous utterance or by explicitly asking the learner to try (either in the target language or by means of language switch).

- E.g. (Group B-12): S8: això no sé com explicar-ho. (Cat.: I don’t know how to explain this)  
Interviewer: ok say something.  
S8: the children and mother look the map.  
E.g. (Group B-12): S9: y hmm no sé “una montaña”? (Spanish: and hmm I don’t know “a mountain”?)  
Interviewer: say it in Spanish if you don’t know.  
S9: es una montaña is hmm dog and cesta. (Sp.: this is a mountain is hmm dog and basket)  
E.g. (Group A-12): S10: hmm the the mother in the chil the children “preparar” no sé com es diu. (Cat.: “prepare” I don’t know how to say that)  
Interviewer: mmhm. (acknowledges)  
S10: the lunch.

E.g. (Group C-10): S11:           hmm the the dog hmm...  
 Interviewer: the dog.  
 S11:           xxx. (unintelligible words)

**Shifting focus** involves ignoring the trouble source that triggered the learner's *appeal* by shifting the learner's focus of attention. From a communicative point of view, this is the least supportive and the most disruptive avoided response to a learner's problem indicator.

E.g. (Group C-10): S12:           and the dog ay! miran ... (Cat.: oh! look at)  
 Interviewer: no? Ok number three now where are the children going?

### 2.3.3. Interviewees' incorporations

The category of incorporations is based on the notion of *uptake* as defined by Lyster and Ranta (1997) and Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001), though with a different operationalization of the construct. These scholars use it to refer to the learner's response to corrective feedback in a teacher-initiated move (Lyster and Ranta 1997) or to the learner's response to feedback in either a teacher-initiated (corrective feedback) or learner-initiated (feedback) move (Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen 2001), but always with a focus on form. In this study, the category of incorporations refers exclusively to the learner's response to feedback in learner-initiated moves and it consists in the learner's incorporation of help in the following or subsequent turns. Learner-initiated moves and incorporations do not necessarily have to be form-focused for them to be taken into account in the analysis.

#### a) Incorporation following a direct appeal

This means incorporating the help provided by the interlocutor as a response to a *direct appeal for assistance*.

E.g. (Group B-12): S13:           hmm "les enseña" cómo se dice? (Spanish: "shows them" how do you say that?)  
 Interviewer: shows.  
 S13:           shows the map.

#### b) Incorporation following an explicit indirect appeal

This means incorporating the help provided by the interlocutor as a response to an *explicit indirect appeal for assistance*.

E.g. (Group A-12): S14:           es que no me acuerdo cómo se llama "comer".  
 (Sp.: the thing is that I don't remember how to say "to eat").



Interviewer: eat.  
 S14: eat the dog.

c) **Incorporation following an implicit indirect appeal**

This means incorporating the help provided by the interlocutor in response to an *implicit indirect appeal for assistance*.

E.g. (Group A-12): S15: and the dog are eat the the...  
 Interviewer: the food the sandwich.  
 S15: the sandwich.

**3. Results and discussion**

**3.1. Interviewees’ use of appeals for assistance**

The group whose performance is proportionally less dependent on the interlocutor’s help is the most proficient group (Group A-12), followed by Group B-12, and the least proficient group, Group C-10, respectively. Table 3 displays the raw frequency counts of utterances containing an *appeal for assistance* together with the total number of utterances produced by each of the groups during the task.<sup>4</sup>

GROUP	UTTERANCES N	APPEALS FOR ASSISTANCE N
A-12	526	103
B-12	615	177
C-10	479	166

TABLE 3: Frequency of learner utterances and appeals for assistance

Figure 1 shows a distribution of the proportional amount of help required by each group with respect to their total amount of talk as measured by the total number of utterances produced.

The observed differences in the proportion of *appeals for assistance* were statistically significant across the groups,  $F=3.15 (2, 87), p=.048$ , particularly between the most proficient group, Group A-12, and the least proficient group, Group C-10,  $p<.05$ . This significant difference together with the decrease that can also be observed in Group B-12, the in-between group as far as proficiency level is concerned, shows that the learners can perform the narration task better and better without engaging the interviewer so often and this suggests a gradual shift from other —to self-

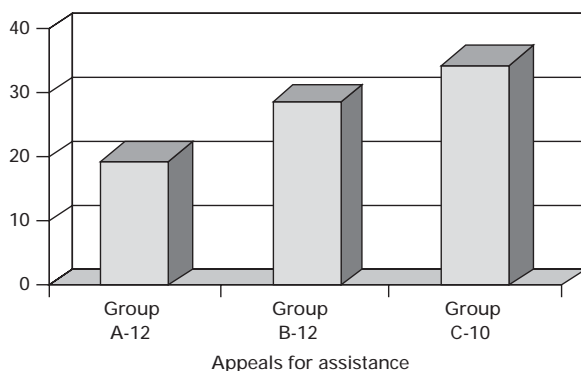


FIGURE 1: Percentage of appeals for assistance

regulated behaviour as proficiency level increases (Vygotsky 1986). In spite of the observed tendency to decline that can be observed in Figure 1, the amount of help the learners required to carry out the task was considerable in the three groups studied. This should be taken into account when assessing L2 learners' performance by means of this type of tasks in the same way as Ross (1992) suggests considering the type and quantity of interviewer adaptation in the assessment of oral interviews.

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### 3.2. Interviewees' proportional use of types of appeals for assistance

Whereas Figure 1 reveals a tendency to decline in the amount of help required to carry out the narration task as proficiency level increases, a qualitative analysis of how the learners appeal for help shows similarities between the two 12-year-old groups, A-12 and B-12, and differences between those two groups and Group C-10, the youngest and least proficient group. Table 4 shows the frequencies of the different types of *appeals for assistance* in each of the groups.

GROUP	DIRECT APPEALS N	EXPLICIT INDIRECT APPEALS N	IMPLICIT INDIRECT APPEALS N
A-12	27	25	51
B-12	54	23	100
C-10	11	15	140

TABLE 4: Frequency of types of appeals for assistance

In Figure 2, the frequencies for the different categories of *appeals for assistance* with respect to the total number of *appeals* can be observed.

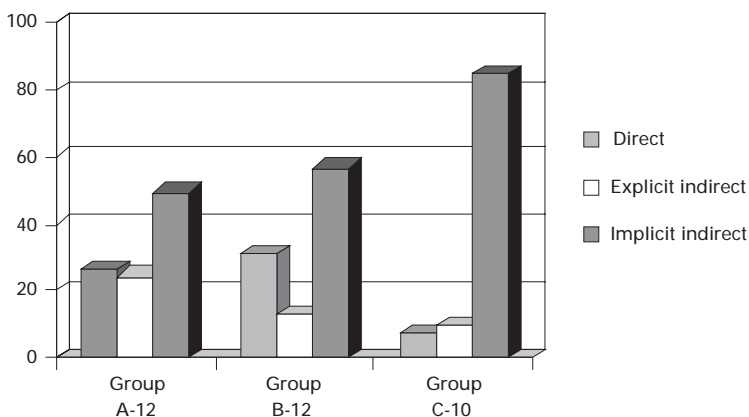


FIGURE 2: Percentages of types of appeals for assistance

Whereas *implicit indirect appeals* follow a clear pattern of decrease down to Group A-12, the most proficient group, the inverse pattern can be observed as far as *explicit indirect appeals* are concerned. As regards *direct appeals*, an increase can be observed from Group C-10, the least proficient group, to Group B-12 and then a decrease from Group B-12 to Group A-12. This pattern suggests that the most proficient group, Group A-12, compensates for the decrease in *direct appeals* by means of *explicit indirect appeals*, which, from a pragmatic perspective, would indicate a preference for more indirect behaviour (i.e., using a declarative to make a request).

Although the highest percentage in the three groups analysed corresponds to the category of *implicit indirect appeals* (see Figure 2), an interesting pattern can be observed if *direct* and *explicit indirect appeals* are merged (see Figure 3). There are several reasons that may justify merging the two categories. *Direct* and *explicit indirect appeals* have in common their explicit and verbal nature. A trouble source has been identified and verbalized. They also impose a clear obligation on the interlocutor to assist by means of a direct response.

In Figure 3, the two groups with the same age, A-12 and B-12, can be seen to follow a very similar pattern with a more balanced distribution of the two categories of *appeals*, whereas Group C-10 shows a preference for *implicit indirect appeals*.

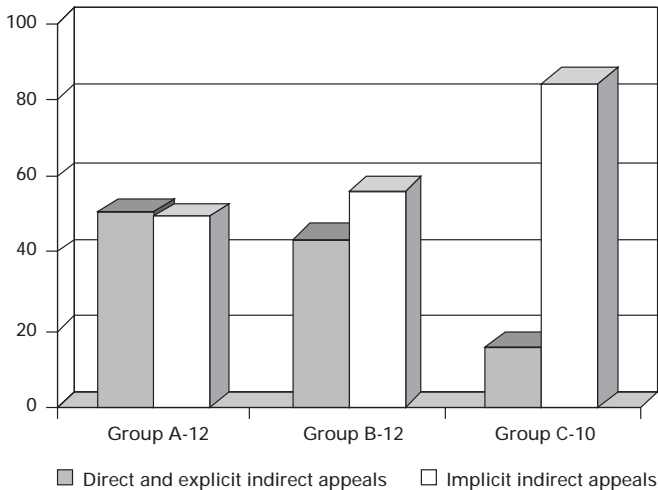


FIGURE 3: Percentages of types of appeals for assistance

The nonparametric alternative to one-way *ANOVA* (*Kruskal-Wallis test*) showed significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) across the three groups. Three *Mann-Whitney U tests* were subsequently run and they showed significant differences between Groups A-12 and B-12, on the one hand, and Group C-10, on the other ( $p < .05$ ) but not between Groups A-12 and B-12 ( $p = .59$ ).

The greater use of *direct* and *explicit indirect appeals* by Group A-12, in comparison to the least proficient group, suggests a relationship between proficiency level and an awareness of L2 needs to sustain discourse. Less proficient learners may be cognitively overloaded by gaps in their L2 knowledge and, consequently, have trouble in identifying L2 needs. As a result, they are less likely to turn to their interlocutor to ask for *direct* or *explicit indirect help*. The linguistic realization of the *appeals* does not seem to interfere since all the learners analysed, irrespective of their proficiency level, always appeal for help in their L1. This function of code switching in the data analysed, i.e., appealing for assistance, would help to explain a greater use of the L1 in the two most proficient groups, the ones that proportionally use more *direct* and *explicit indirect appeals*.

The greater use of *direct* and *explicit indirect appeals* by Group A-12 also implies that more proficient learners exhibit greater achievement behaviour in communication when trouble arises whereas less proficient learners tend to hesitate or remain silent. Faerch and Kasper (1982) point out that beginners are typically

reducers and that this may overrule the inverse relationship between proficiency level and the need for appealing. The fact that the least proficient group is the group with the highest percentage of *implicit indirect appeals*, the least cooperative type of *appeal* realized by means of a variety of nonverbal signals of uncertainty, is in line with that characterization of beginners as reducers. In fact, the learner who hesitates or remains silent might be actually abandoning the message unwilling to sustain discourse. As a result, it is not always clear whether the learner has identified a trouble source and is actually appealing for help or whether s/he is cognitively overloaded by L2 gaps and is abandoning the message. Nevertheless, the perspective taken in this study is that of the interviewer who, confronted with such hesitation phenomena/silences, is seen to intervene offering some kind of assistance in the three groups analysed. Tarone (1983) claims that this is a common effect of *avoidance strategies* such as *message abandonment* in FL interaction.

Apart from the effect of proficiency level, age also seems to contribute to the way L2 learners appeal for assistance given that the two 12-year-old groups, A-12 and B-12, use the different types of *appeals* to a very similar extent, despite the fact that one group is more proficient than the other. Even though the performance of Group A-12 in the tests measuring general proficiency was significantly different with respect to that of Group B-12, there are no significant differences between them as regards the use of *direct* and *explicit indirect appeals*. This is taken as evidence for older learners' greater involvement in conversation as a result of their greater achievement behaviour, a characteristic that is thought to contribute to their differential learning rate (Scarcella and Higa 1982). In addition, *explicit indirect appeals* are metalingual signals of uncertainty that include a self-attribution of ignorance (Palmberg 1979), reflecting thus an attitude that may be more typical of older learners.

The *direct* and *explicit indirect appeals* identified in the data were all aimed at bridging gaps in the learners' lexical knowledge. Lexis is in fact the level at which CSs are mostly used, especially in information-focused tasks (Kasper and Kellerman 1997). Nevertheless, CSs may also occur at other levels of linguistic competence (Manchón 1998). Further research would be needed with more proficient learners to examine whether they produce any *appeals* aimed at bridging gaps in their morphosyntactic or pragmatic knowledge, which would indicate a reallocation of attentional capacity to other areas of linguistic competence as proficiency level increases. Another possibility is that *appeals for assistance* only operate on the lexicon. Buckwalter (2001) found that the learner in her study addressed morphosyntactic problems by means of *self-repair* whereas *appeals for assistance* operated mainly on the lexicon. In that case, further research would be needed regarding the use of *self-repair* by the learners analysed, especially in relation to the use of *appeals for assistance*. Buckwalter (2001) also reports that the learners

in her study, who were adult FL learners, showed a clear preference for *self-repair* when they experienced problems in production. Further research should be undertaken to show the role played by age and proficiency level in the frequency of use of *self-repairs* and *appeals for assistance* as indicators of self-regulated and other-regulated behaviour, respectively.

### 3.3. Interviewers' responses to the learners' appeals

Table 5 shows the frequencies of the types of interviewer responses to learners' *appeals for assistance*.

GROUP	DIRECT RESPONSES N	AVOIDED RESPONSES N	TOTAL N
A-12	52	51	103
B-12	74	103	177
C-10	38	128	166

TABLE 5: Frequency of types of interviewer responses

In the proportional amount of direct and avoided responses to *appeals* on the part of the interviewers (see Figure 4), an effect of the different degrees of obligation to assist that the different types of appeals impose on the interlocutor can be observed.

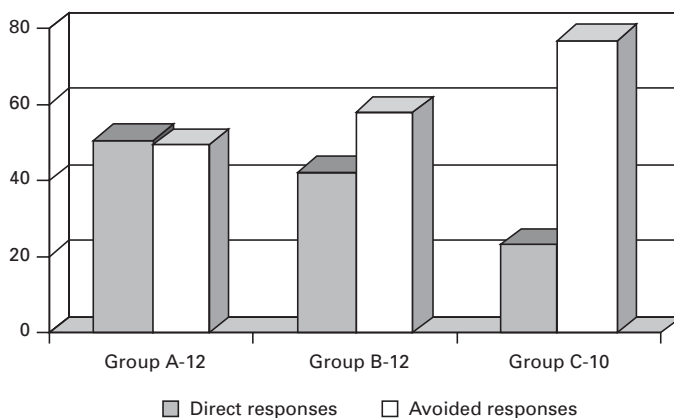


FIGURE 4: Percentages of types of interviewer responses to appeals

The group that proportionally receives more direct responses, Group A-12, is the group that made a greater use of *direct* and *explicit indirect appeals* (see Figure 3), followed by Group B-12. On the other hand, the group that proportionally receives more avoided responses, Group C-10, is the group that made a greater use of *implicit indirect appeals*, the one that imposes the weakest obligation to assist by means of a direct response. This shows how the interactional skills of the participants in the task analysed can have an effect in the amount of feedback they receive from their learning environment. The two groups of older learners as a result of the way in which they appeal for assistance happen to receive more feedback in the form of direct responses than the younger group. Oliver (2000) argues, referring to the greater amount of negative feedback that the older learners in her study were observed to receive, that this may partially explain the differential learning rate of adults and children as input-based explanations for age-related differences.

The fact that the group with the highest percentage of the type of *appeal* that imposes the weakest obligation to assist receives the highest percentage of avoided responses shows in turn the interviewers' low willingness to help the learners directly, an attitude that is justified by the goal the interviewers (researchers) pursued and which was eliciting a representative language sample from the learners with the aim of evaluating their performance.

Although the interviewers may have avoided direct help for research purposes and this may have prevented them from obtaining realistic results (Faerch and Kasper 1984), it is interesting to note that the interviewers resort mainly to question elicitation in order to avoid providing direct help with the three groups of learners analysed. Eliciting through questioning can be seen in fact as a form of verbal assistance. Vygotsky (1978) viewed questions as a linguistic tool that mediates, assists, and scaffolds mental activity. In a study of teacher questions, McCormick and Donato (2000) found that during teacher-fronted activities questions served as scaffolded assistance by means of which learners could achieve tasks that they could not have achieved alone. In Table 6, the frequency counts of the types of direct and avoided responses are displayed.

Figure 5 shows the frequency of occurrence of the different types of direct and avoided responses as a percent of the total number of interviewer responses.

Apart from the weak obligation to assist of *implicit indirect appeals*, another reason may explain the interviewers' comparatively greater use of question elicitation with the youngest and least proficient learners (Group C-10) and this is the need to involve those learners in conversation by keeping and focusing their attention. In a naturalistic language-learning context, Scarcella and Higa (1982) found that native speakers used a series of devices to keep and focus attention more frequently with child than with adolescent L2 learners.

GROUP	DIRECT RESPONSE N	AVOIDED RESPONSE: QUESTION ELICITATION N	AVOIDED RESPONSE: ENCOURAGING N	AVOIDED RESPONSE: SHIFTING N
A-12	52	32	15	4
B-12	74	55	17	31
C-10	38	77	23	28

TABLE 6: Frequency of types of interviewer direct and avoided responses

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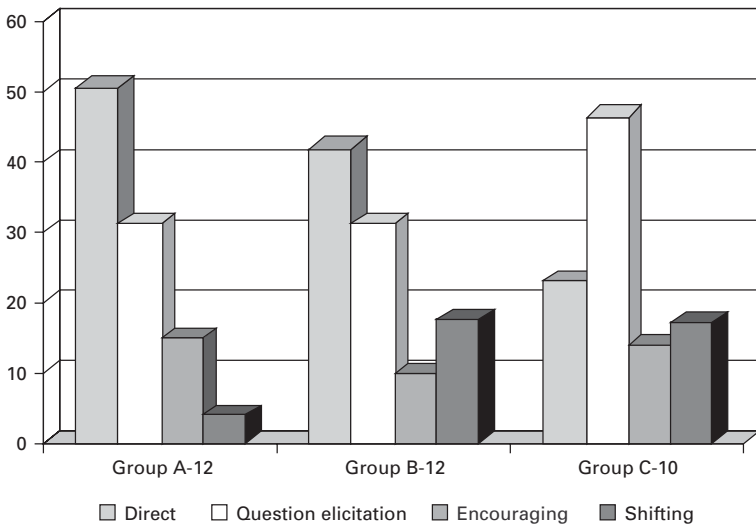


FIGURE 5: Percentages of types of interviewer's direct and avoided responses to appeals

Finally, the group that proportionally receives fewer avoided responses consisting in a shift of communicative focus is the most proficient group, Group A-12, which suggests that the interviewers considered those learners as more capable of expressing their communicative goal when trouble arose.

### 3.4. Interviewees' incorporation of feedback

Table 7 displays the raw frequency counts of the learners' incorporations of the interviewers' direct responses following each type of *appeal for assistance*. In order to measure incorporations, those interviewer turns containing a direct response but



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which gave no opportunity for the learner to take up the feedback were not taken into account. This methodological advance in the measurement of *uptake* was put forward by Oliver (1995) and it eliminates from the analysis those turns in which the interviewer, after providing feedback, continues his or her turn by means of topic switch or topic continuation.

E.g. (Group C-10): S16: la madre aquí hmm mother look a map and  
 dog hmm look a... (Sp.: the mother here hmm)  
 Interviewer: it's a basket basket good and here what are  
 they doing?

Those instances where the learners did not have the opportunity to react to the feedback were 6.1% of the total in Group A-12, 8.1% in Group B-12, and 15.2% in Group C-10.

GROUP	INTERVIEWER DIRECT RESPONSES N			INTERVIEWER DIRECT RESPONSES OFFERING OPPORTUNITY TO INCORPORATE N			LEARNER INCORPORATIONS N			TOTAL N
	da	iaex	iaim	da	iaex	iaim	da	iaex	iaim	
A-12	23	9	20	22	9	18	21	8	15	44
B-12	47	11	16	46	11	11	43	6	7	56
C-10	7	6	25	7	5	21	7	5	12	25

da = direct appeals; iaex = explicit indirect appeals; iaim = implicit indirect appeals

TABLE 7: Frequency of learner incorporations

Figure 6 shows the frequency of occurrence of incorporations as a percent of the sum of the interviewers' direct responses to *appeals for assistance*, the total amount of feedback that could be potentially incorporated as a result of learner-initiated episodes.

The most proficient group, A-12, is the group that proportionally incorporates a greater amount of the interviewers' feedback into their discourse, followed by Group B-12. No significant differences across the groups were reported by the *Kruskal-Wallis test* ( $p=.25$ ).

The fact that the more proficient learners show a tendency to incorporate feedback more often is in line with Mackey, Gass and McDonough (2000), who argue that the frequency with which learners perceive interactional feedback may be determined by developmental stage in order to avoid cognitive overload.

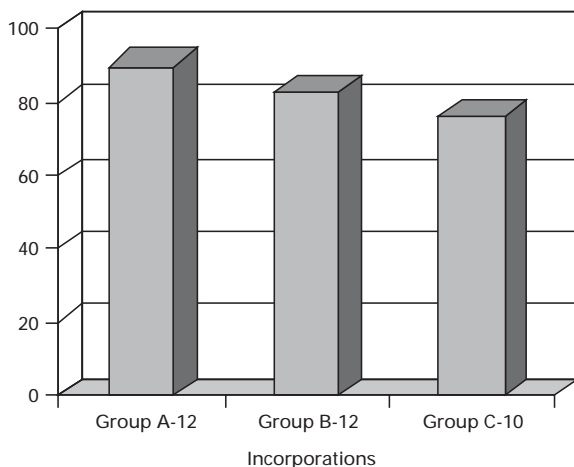


FIGURE 6: Percentage of incorporations

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Proficiency may therefore have a higher impact than age in this respect as the proportional increase of incorporations up to the most proficient group suggests.

The greater number of incorporations by the two most proficient groups could be again taken as evidence for those learners' more active involvement in conversation. It may also suggest a higher level of conscious noticing (Schmidt 1990) and even a different orientation to learning with a greater willingness to register stimuli in short-term memory.

Figure 7 shows the proportional amount of the learners' incorporations of the interviewers' direct responses following each type of *appeal for assistance*.

The type of *appeal for assistance* that leads to learner incorporation of feedback more often within each of the three groups analysed is the *direct appeal*. This fact would further account for the greater amount of incorporations in the two groups with a higher percentage of *direct appeals*, Groups A-12 and B-12, the two groups that seem to benefit more from their learning environment as a result of their involvement in conversation manifest in how they appeal for help.

The fact that *direct appeals* lead to incorporation of feedback more often seems to show that the degree of explicitness of the *appeal for assistance* is playing a role in learners' incorporation of feedback. This is further supported by the fact that the *explicit indirect appeal* leads to more incorporations than the *implicit indirect* in two of the groups analysed, A-12 and C-10. This suggests that incorporation of

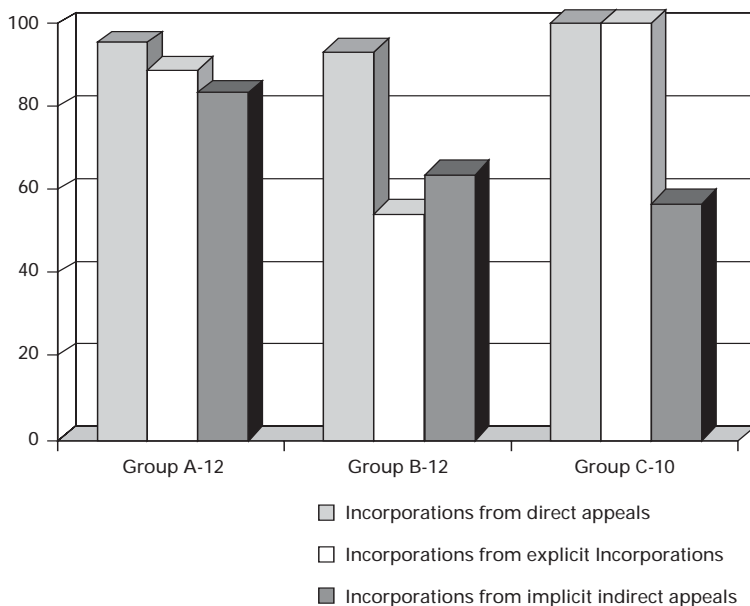


FIGURE 7: Percentages of learner incorporations following each type of appeal

help may depend on the learner’s identification and verbalization of L2 gaps as well as on a clear willingness to fill them. This seems to be a more necessary requirement for the less proficient group, Group C-10, than for the most proficient group, Group A-12, which shows a more balanced pattern with incorporations of help from responses to the three types of *appeals*.

### 3. Conclusion

This study has examined the extent to which L2 learners of different ages and proficiency levels appeal for assistance in oral interaction, how they do it, and how their interlocutor assists them. It has also focused on the extent to which those learners incorporate the help provided into their subsequent discourse.

Results have shown L2 learners’ greater tendency towards self-regulated behaviour as proficiency level increases with a decrease in the frequency of use of *appeals for assistance*. The analysis suggests that older and more proficient learners show

greater determination to find a solution when they run into a production problem by turning to their interlocutor for *explicit* help. This particular aspect of their interactional skills could contribute to see them more involved in conversation and it has been observed to have an influence on the amount of feedback they receive from their interviewers, particularly in the amount of direct responses to their *appeals for assistance*. Younger and less proficient learners, on the other hand, show a greater tendency to hesitate or remain silent, leaving all responsibility for sustaining discourse to their interlocutor, a behaviour that has been observed to trigger a response move on the part of the interviewer aimed at providing some kind of assistance usually avoiding the provision of a direct response.

Results have also shown an increase in the frequency of learners' incorporation of help with proficiency level. The type of *appeal* that triggered more incorporations in the three groups analysed was the most explicit type of *appeal for assistance*, the *direct appeal*. This suggests that a requirement for learner incorporation of help may be that the learner preempts attention to a linguistic gap s/he has identified, verbalizes the needed L2 item, and clearly attempts to bridge the gap. The fact that *direct appeals* facilitate incorporation further accounts for the greater amount of incorporations by the two groups with a highest percentage of that type of *appeals*.

The results obtained are taken as evidence for the role of age and proficiency level in the interactional skills of FL learners, specifically in the amount of involvement in conversation and determination to sustain discourse, and also for the role of those interactional skills in the learning environment of FL learners, specifically in the amount of feedback received and incorporated.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup>. The mean score reported as an indicator of general proficiency in each of the groups is the result of the average performance of the students analysed on 4 written tests (English cloze, dictation, multiple choice, and listening tests), all of them administered to the participants in the Barcelona Age Factor (BAF) Project.

<sup>3</sup>. From the point of view of the learner, some overlap may occur between *implicit indirect appeals* and *message abandonment*, a *functional reduction strategy* that involves leaving a message unfinished without any intention of reaching the communicative goal (Faerch and Kasper 1983). However, from an interactional perspective, both appealing nonverbally for help and

abandoning the message trigger a response move on the part of the interviewer aimed at assisting the learner in some way or another. This has been the criterion used to identify *implicit indirect appeals* in this study for the three groups analysed. Katona (1998), for example, argues that *reduction strategies* as well as *language switch* and *appeals for assistance* all function as *help-requesting strategies* in interaction and merges them into a single category. This study does not include either *language switches* or *message reduction strategies* because the interviewer response to the learner's use of those strategies, if any, is interpreted as other-initiated corrective feedback.

<sup>4</sup>. Learner silences (Group A-12=11; Group B-12=54; Group C-10=56) were counted as *implicit indirect appeals for assistance* and, and as a result, they were added to the total number of utterances in order to get a proportional frequency of occurrence.

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