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An investigation into the impact of age and task type on oral interactions of young learners of Chinese as a second language

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Abstract

Oral interaction is crucial for second language learning because it provides opportunities to practice the target language and enhance the comprehensibility of both input and output (Long, 1981; Oliver, 2002; Swain, 2005). However, there is a paucity of research that has examined oral interactions among young learners of Chinese as a second language. This study involved 110 students aged 10-12 from five primary schools in Hong Kong. The study analyzed interaction patterns and topic management skills when they performed two types of tasks. Results showed that the most frequently displayed pattern was collaborative, followed by dominant/passive. Regarding the impact of task type, the percentages of collaborative and expert/novice patterns were higher in the required information exchange tasks than in the optional information exchange tasks. In addition, the required information exchange tasks triggered significantly more turns, target language, short-other-extensions, and other-extensions than the optional information exchange tasks. There was an increase in the exhibition of collaborative patterns and a decrease in dominant/passive patterns from Grades 4 to 6. However, there were no significant differences in the measures of topic management skills across the three grades.

Keywords: Chinese as a second language; age; task type; interaction patterns; topic management skills

1. Introduction

From a cognitive-interactionist perspective (e.g., Gass et al., 2005; Loewen & Sato, 2018; Long, 1981; Mackey et al., 2013; Oliver, 2002; Sato & Ballinger, 2016; Swain, 2005), oral interaction is essential for second language (L2) acquisition as it provides learners with opportunities to practice the target language and elicits negotiation of meaning and form. These psycholinguistic processes enhance the comprehensibility of learners' input and output, thereby facilitating L2 development. More importantly, according to sociocultural theory, knowledge is constructed through social interactions, which are crucial for learning and cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). However, children's challenges in engaging collaboratively in L2 interaction are well documented in the literature (Pinter, 2007), such as concentrating on one's own topics and a lack of elaboration on others' topics. Research on young English language learners indicates age-related developmental patterns in oral interactions (Butler & Zeng, 2014, 2015; Oliver, 2002, 2008; Oliver et al., 2017). As age develops, children become more aware of others' perspectives and needs, achieve higher proficiency levels, and gain richer social experience. These attributes contribute to their development in oral interactions. Several studies have shown that older children tend to be more collaborative than their younger counterparts when engaged in the same oral tasks (Butler & Zeng, 2014, 2015; Oliver, 2002, 2008; Oliver et al., 2017).

Another line of studies has explored the effects of task type on oral interactions (Doughty & Pica, 1986; Oliver & Azkarai, 2019). Task types can be categorized from different perspectives (Loewen & Sato, 2018; Skehan, 1996), such as interactional relationships, goal orientation, and discourse genre. Based on interactional requirements, tasks can be categorized into required information exchange tasks and optional information exchange tasks (e.g., Doughty & Pica, 1986; Loewen & Sato, 2018; Yan et al., 2025). Prior studies have revealed that different task types can result in variations in turn-taking, mental efforts, attention to form, and interaction patterns (Dao, 2021; Gass et al., 2005; Qiu & Cheng, 2022). However, oral interactions amongst young learners of Chinese as an L2 (CSL) in the Asian context have received less attention compared with those of English language learners. In Hong Kong, CSL learners are predominantly from South Asia, including countries such as Pakistan and Nepal. Their number has dramatically increased during the last decade. However, the curriculum and instructional strategies neglect oral interaction practice, instead focusing on literacy skills (Cong et al., 2012; Xie et al., 2012). Therefore, we have little knowledge about their oral interactional characteristics. This study, thus, recruited young CSL learners from Grades 4-6 to perform two types of tasks, with the purpose of examining the age-related differences and how task type shapes their oral interaction.

2. Literature review

2.1. Studies on oral interaction patterns

Oral interactions can be analyzed through two complementary perspectives: interaction patterns and interactional characteristics. From the perspective of sociocultural theory, Storch (2002) conceptualizes interaction along the dimensions of *mutuality* and *equality*. High *mutuality* is characterized by reciprocal feedback and sharing ideas among interlocutors. High *equality* refers to a situation in which interlocutors contribute equally to the task and exert similar levels of control over it. Based on these two constructs, she categorizes interactions into four patterns: *collaborative*, *dominant/dominant*, *dominant/passive*, and *expert/novice*. Storch (2002, 2005) further elaborates on two cases within the *dominant/dominant* pattern. In the first case, both interlocutors contribute to the task but have difficulties reaching a consensus. In the second case, interlocutors opt for a division of labor and contribute to the task individually.

Tan et al. (2010) labeled the second case as *cooperative* because neither speaker controls the task. However, Bulter and Zeng (2014) argued that the term *cooperative* was misleading as it could be easily confused with the *collaborative* pattern. They referred to the second case as *passive parallel* to avoid ambiguity. According to Butler and Zeng (2015), *passive parallel* describes interactions with minimal contributions from both speakers. This description slightly deviates from the *cooperative* pattern, which involves a division of labor. The difference arises because Butler and Zeng (2014) recruited primary students as their participants. Given their immature language and cognitive abilities, taking a passive role in interactions without dividing the labor is common for both interlocutors. Yan et al. (2025) reported similar findings in their study of young Chinese language learners' oral interactions in Hong Kong. Drawn from previous studies and considering the characteristics of the participants, this study adopted five patterns to analyze oral interaction. The definitions are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Categorizations of interaction patterns

Pattern	Mutuality	Equality	Description
Collaborative	Moderate to high	Moderate to high	Both speakers are willing to offer and engage with each other's ideas.
Dominant/ dominant	Moderate to low	Moderate to high	Although both speakers contribute to the task, they are unwilling to fully engage with each other's ideas.
Dominant/ passive	Moderate to low	Moderate to low	The dominant speaker in a pair takes an authoritative stance. The interlocutor seems to adopt a more passive and subservient role.
Expert/ novice	Moderate to high	Moderate to low	Although one speaker seems to take more control over the task, unlike the dominant/passive pattern, this speaker acts as an "expert" who actively encourages the "novice" to engage in interaction.
Passive parallel	Moderate to low	Moderate to low	Both speakers contribute limitedly to the task, and neither of them takes control.

In addition to the global qualitative method for categorizing interaction patterns, several studies have utilized discourse analysis to investigate interactional characteristics (Barraja-Rohan, 2011; Çimenli et al., 2022; Kunitz & Yeh, 2019; Salaberry & Kunitz, 2019; Wong & Waring, 2020). These studies have emphasized that topic management is a crucial social aspect of oral interaction. Topic management refers to a speaker's ability to initiate, develop, and gradually shift from one topic to another (Kunitz & Yeh, 2019; Salaberry & Kunitz, 2019). Galaczi (2008) utilized a topic sequence as a unit of analysis for examining topic management. A topic sequence comprises the first turn that initiated discussion related to a certain topic and all subsequent utterances related to it. Utterances are then classified into topic initiation (TI) (i.e., initiating a new topic), self-extension (i.e., extending one's own topics), other-extension (i.e., extension of their interlocutors' topics), and minimal acknowledgements (MAs) (i.e., yes or no). Other-extension plays an important role in distinguishing higher proficiency learners from lower proficiency learners. Learners with higher proficiency tended to expand topics initiated by their interlocutors, whereas those with lower proficiency levels focused on extending their own topics and seldom responded to their interlocutors' topics (Galaczi, 2014).

2.2. Young L2 learners' oral interaction

Several studies have explored interaction patterns and interactional characteristics among young L2 learners (Ahmadian & Tajabadi, 2017; Oliver & Azkarai, 2019; Pladevall-Ballester & Vraciu, 2020). Oliver and Azkarai (2019) analyzed oral interactions amongst 9-12-year-old learners of English as an L2 (ESL) during two tasks. The most frequently observed pattern was collaborative, followed by dominant/passive. Other researchers (e.g., Azkarai & Kopinska, 2020; Butler & Zeng, 2014, 2015) have focused on young English as a foreign language (EFL) learners aged 6 to 12 in diverse sociocultural contexts. Their findings suggest that the collaborative pattern is commonly used among these young learners. Additionally, young EFL learners also frequently display the cooperative pattern (Azkarai & Kopinska, 2020), the passive parallel pattern (Butler & Zeng, 2014, 2015), and the dominant/dominant pattern (Ahmadian & Tajabadi, 2017). Overall, results from prior research indicate that most young EFL and ESL learners are capable of engaging in oral interactions with moderate to high levels of mutuality and equality.

Whilst the collaborative pattern is dominant, age-related differences have been noted in middle childhood (primary school age, ranging from 5 to 12). For example, Oliver et al. (2017) examined the interactions of 22 children aged 5-8 and 20 children aged 9-12 learning ESL when performing five tasks over two weeks. Older children collaborated more than the younger children and revealed

a higher degree of reciprocity in communication. Additionally, the older children were more focused on tasks, whilst the younger children were more cognitively engaged with the tasks. This interpretation was based on the observation that younger children engaged in language play (i.e., sounds that expressed intrinsic enjoyment) more frequently than older children.

Butler and Zeng's (2014, 2015) studies focused on the subtle differences within the age group of 9-12-year-olds, particularly between Grade 4 (9-10-year-olds) and Grade 6 (11-12-year-olds). Butler and Zeng (2014) analyzed the EFL learners' interaction patterns, topic development skills, and communication functions (e.g., question and explanation). Their results demonstrated a dominant pattern of passive parallel among Grade 4 children, whilst Grade 6 children predominantly displayed the collaborative pattern. Furthermore, Grade 4 children exhibited more non-extended topic sequences (63.4%) than Grade 6 children (37%). In addition, Grade 6 children used significantly more communicative functions than Grade 4 children, such as asking for and providing information.

In another study, Butler and Zeng (2015) compared interaction patterns and topic development among 48 9-12-year-old EFL learners' oral interactions in their first language (L1) and foreign language (FL). Grade 4 children primarily displayed dominant/dominant in L1 and passive parallel in FL. In contrast, Grade 6 children mainly exhibited the collaborative pattern in both languages. Regarding topic development, younger children predominantly displayed topic sequences without cross-speaker extensions (i.e., extending on others' topics), indicating that younger children seldom elaborated on interlocutors' messages during interactions. Children used more cross-speaker extension topic sequences in L1 than in FL within the same grade, indicating collaboration challenges in FL. The authors explained that the differences between Grade 4 and Grade 6 were linked to English proficiency, with older students being exposed to more target language.

As shown above, previous studies indicate age-related differences in children's oral interactions. Older children are more capable of collaborating with each other and extending on others' topics during oral interactions than younger children. However, this development could be influenced by language exposure, especially in L2. Notably, these studies were conducted in the context where oral interaction was a focus of the curriculum. Although Butler and Zeng's (2015) study was in China, the school curriculum adopted a communicative language approach. Limited research has examined young learners' oral interactions in a context wherein the curriculum and instruction primarily underscore literacy skills (Cong et al., 2012).

2.3. Task characteristics and L2 interaction

Another strand of research has explored how task type shapes L2 learners' interaction (Azkarai et al., 2020; Dao, 2021; Kaivanpanah & Miri, 2017; Oliver et al., 2017; Oliver & Azkarai, 2019; Qiu & Cheng, 2022). Tasks can be categorized into different types from multiple perspectives, including interactional relationship (information held by different participants), goal orientation (convergent vs. divergent), discourse genre (narrative vs. argumentative), and interactional requirements (required vs. optional information exchange) (Loewen & Sato, 2018; Skehan, 1996). Focusing on interactional relationships, Oliver et al. (2017) examined interaction patterns among 64 young L2 learners aged between 8-10 years old and 11-13 years old through the use of one-way and two-way tasks. In the one-way task, information was exclusively held by one speaker who was responsible for conveying this information so that the interlocutor could draw a picture. In the two-way task, both speakers held some pieces of information and needed to exchange it to fulfil the task. The authors found that the participants mainly interacted with each other in a collaborative manner. The two-way task elicited greater collaboration between low proficiency learners and native speakers, whereas the one-way task elicited greater collaboration between high proficiency learners and native speakers.

Regarding goal orientation, tasks can be categorized into *convergent* and *divergent* types. A *convergent* task has a single outcome, whereas a *divergent* task allows for multiple outcomes. Dao (2021) examined the cognitive, emotional, and social engagement of 16 EFL learners while they performed a convergent task and a divergent task. Cognitive engagement was operationalized through idea units and language-related episodes, emotional engagement through instances of explicit task enjoyment, and social engagement through instances of responsiveness. The results showed that learners had greater cognitive and social engagement in the convergent task. The author concluded that task type, along with goal orientation, had affected learners' mental efforts and their attention to form. From the perspective of genre, tasks can be categorized into narrative tasks and opinion-gap tasks (Qiu & Cheng, 2022; Skehan, 1996). Qiu and Cheng (2022) argued that narrative tasks (i.e., storytelling) elicited narrative discourse, while opinion-gap tasks were likely to induce argumentative discussion discourse. In their study, 20 EFL learners performed two storytelling tasks and two opinion-gap tasks. The findings revealed that learners spent more time, engaged in more turn-taking, and utilized more negotiation moves aimed at clarifying language in the storytelling tasks compared to the opinion-gap tasks.

Based on interactional requirements, Doughty and Pica (1986) distinguished between *required information exchange tasks* and *optional information exchange*

tasks. In the former, information is distributed amongst speakers, thus requiring them to cooperate and exchange information to complete the task. In *optional information exchange tasks*, information is shared amongst speakers, making it possible for individuals to complete the task independently. Some studies have examined the impact of these two types of tasks on language-related episodes and negotiation of meaning (Doughty & Pica, 1986; Foster, 1998; Gass et al., 2005; Gilabert et al., 2009). The seminal investigation by Gass et al. (2005) employed one optional information exchange task and two required information exchange tasks, involving 74 university students learning Spanish as an FL. These participants performed the tasks in either a classroom setting or a laboratory setting. The results showed that in both settings, required information exchange tasks elicited significantly more negotiation moves and language-related episodes than the optional information exchange task.

Overall, prior research has indicated that task type influences learners' interactional characteristics, such as turn-taking, responsiveness, language-related episodes, and negotiation of meaning. However, the impact of required information exchange tasks and optional information tasks on young L2 learners' interaction patterns and topic management skills has seldom been investigated in the literature, which is why it is the focus of the current study.

3. The study

3.1. Aims and research questions

Previous research has shown that age-related differences exist among young L2 learners' oral interactions and that task type can influence their interactions. However, most of these studies have focused on English language learners, while research on young learners of CSL in an Asian context remains scarce. To provide a comprehensive picture of how young L2 learners interact with each other, this study examined their oral interactions in terms of interaction patterns and topic management skills, as well as the effects of age and task type. Therefore, the study aimed to address the following research questions.

RQ1: What are the overall interaction patterns among young learners of CSL?
RQ2: What is the impact of age on their interaction patterns and topic management skills?
RQ3: What is the impact of task type on their interaction patterns and topic management skills?

3.2. Participants

The data for the present study were drawn from a larger project that examined negotiation of meaning strategies among young CSL learners (Yan & Goh, 2025). The participants comprised 110 CSL learners aged 10-12 from five local primary schools in Hong Kong. The schools have adopted an inclusive practice where CSL students study alongside their Chinese-speaking peers. While Cantonese serves as the medium of instruction for Chinese language classes, English is the medium for teaching other content subjects. Among these students, 40 students were in Grade 4, 35 were in Grade 5, and 35 were in Grade 6. There were 63 female and 47 male students. Two participants did not fill in the language background survey, which led to missing data. Their nationalities and L1 backgrounds were diverse and comprised Pakistan (Urdu), the Philippines (English/Filipino), India (Hindi), and Nepal (Nepali). Table 2 presents the number of years students from three grades had been living in Hong Kong. Most Grade 4 students (57. 89%) had been living in Hong Kong for 5-10 years. In contrast, the majority of Grade 5 students (54.29%) and a significant portion of Grade 6 students (80.00%) had resided in Hong Kong for more than 10 years. Teachers from the participating schools assisted in pairing up participants with partners who were age- and proficiency-matched and familiar to them.

Table 2 Years of living in Hong Kong by CSL students across three grades

Years		0-5		5-10		10 or more
Grade	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
4	5	13.16	22	57.89	11	28.95
5	1	2.85	15	42.86	19	54.29
6	2	5.71	5	14.29	28	80.00

3.3. Task design and procedures

This study involved designing two required information exchange tasks, spot-the-differences (STD), and two optional information exchange tasks, decision-making, based on vocabulary and topics in local Chinese textbooks. The tasks were consulted with two Chinese teachers and then piloted to ensure their appropriateness for the learners' Chinese proficiency levels.

For the STD task, each speaker in a pair was provided with a picture and was required to find the differences by describing their pictures to their partners. We established a baffle in-between to prevent the interlocutors from viewing each other's pictures. This was a *convergent* task with a single outcome as five differences were fixed and pre-determined. Two versions of this task type were designed,

with the second one being more complex than the first one, including more elements in the pictures. A demo was offered before the task, in which a trained student helper guided the learners to determine the differences between two pictures of cars. This was to familiarize learners with the procedure. The decision-making task asked a dyad to exchange opinions and collaboratively choose five items from a given list that they wanted to bring on a trip to Ocean Park. This type of task was convergent but allowed multiple open outcomes. There were two versions of this task type, with the second one being more complex than the first one by containing budget and weather constraints. The study adopted a repeated-measures design in which learners performed the four tasks. To ensure consistency across schools and control for potential unforeseen variables, the students completed the tasks outside of regular class time and worked in the same pairs for all four tasks. The tasks were randomly sequenced to eliminate practice effect, ensuring that some groups started with the STD tasks, while others began with the decision-making tasks. The sequences were reported in Yan and Goh (2025).

The study was conducted in five participating schools. Several undergraduate students from the researcher's university, majoring in education-related subjects, were hired as student helpers to conduct one-on-one dyad oral tests. All student helpers received the training prior to the study. The task instructions were written and handed to each helper. The helper was responsible for reading aloud the instructions to the dyad, audio and video-recording the interacting process, and providing minimal guidance if students displayed comprehension problems or prolonged silence.

3.4. Data analysis

3.4.1. Interaction pattern

The participants' oral interactions were analyzed in terms of interaction patterns and topic management skills. All oral interactions were videotaped and transcribed following the conventions in the literature (see Appendix). Each dyad completed four tasks, yielding a total of 220 interactions. Each interaction was individually analyzed, utilizing Storch's (2002) and Butler and Zeng's (2014, 2015) frameworks. As depicted in Table 1, interaction patterns include collaborative (see Excerpt 2), dominant/dominant (see Excerpt 3), dominant/passive (see Excerpt 4), expert/novice (see Excerpt 5), and passive parallel (see Excerpt 6). The collaborative and expert/novice patterns are considered supportive interactions, whereas the other three are treated as unsupportive. The analysis methods were reported in Yan et al. (2025). Two research assistants selected a sample of videos and documented interlocutors' engagement, levels of contribution, and relevant roles. These features were then compared and used to determine the interaction pattern to which the performance belonged.

Ambiguity was identified between the dominant/passive and the expert/novice patterns. For example, the dominant speaker in one dyad frequently used the phrase "your turn" to invite the other speaker to contribute. However, this phrase did not strongly indicate an intent to scaffold the passive speaker but rather suggested a simple "passing the ball" to the interlocutor. Furthermore, they rarely engaged with each other's opinions. Thus, this pattern was classified as dominant/passive rather than expert/novice. The discrepancies were solved through discussion. The interrater reliability between the two coders achieved 88.64%. A third coder, who had a relevant degree and received prior training, was invited to reassess the interaction pattern in the event of a disagreement. The frequencies and percentages of the five interaction patterns were then compared across grades and between the two task types.

3.4.2. Topic management skills

For topic management skills, the study analyzed the number of turns and the amount of target language production by counting the number of Chinese characters in the transcripts. Then, the study used the discourse analysis methods in Galaczi (2008) to examine topic management skills. A TI was defined as oral utterances talking about any aspects of a visual object in pictures. Following the TI, subsequent utterances from the interlocutors were categorized into MAs, which include minimal responses, such as "Yes" and "No;" self-extensions, which involve utterances of elaborating on one's own topic; and other-extensions, which involve utterances of elaborating on a topic initiated by the interlocutor. After coding a sample of data, apart from "Yes" and "No" as MAs, there were numerous short responses, usually comprising only one word, such as "紅色, red" and "男孩, boy." These responses extended the interlocutor's topic in a minimal way and differed from other-extensions, which were interpreted as elaborative responses. Therefore, we labeled this form of extension as "short other-extension." An example of coding is presented in Excerpt 1. Student 1 (S1) initiated a topic, "mother" as it referred to one visual object in the pictures. Then, S2 added details about the mother in line 2, which was coded as "other-extension." Moreover, S2 mentioned another visual object, "the younger sister," which was coded as a TI. In line 3, S1 requested further information about the younger sister, which was coded as "other-extension." S2 responded with one word, "開心, happy," which is a "short other-extension." In line 4, S1 shifted the topic from the younger sister back to the mother, seeking information about her facial expression. S2 replied, "都係開心, also happy," which is coded as "other-extension."

A quarter of the data were double-coded, with interrater reliability reaching 89.5%, which was satisfactory. The results of the Shapiro-Wilk tests indicated that the measures of topic management skills were not normally distributed.

Thus, this study utilized non-parametric tests. First, we calculated frequencies of TIs, MAs, self-extensions, short other-extensions, and other-extensions. To standardize the results, we then calculated the frequencies of these measures per 100 turns. The differences between topic management skills amongst the two types of tasks were analyzed by conducting Wilcoxon signed-rank tests. A Kruskal-Wallis test was utilized for the differences among grades.

Excerpt 1 An example of coding topic management skills

Lines	Students	Content
1	1	你見到乜嘢啊？即係媽媽同= What did you see? So it's the mother= [Topic 1] (TI)
2	2	=我見到個媽媽著緊白色衫同埋藍色褲，個妹妹著緊粉紅色= =I saw the mother wearing a white shirt and blue pants (other-extension), and the younger sister= [Topic 2] wearing pink= (TI)
3	1	=個表情啊 =And her facial expression? (other-extension)
4	2	開心。 Happy (short other-extension)
5	1	媽媽呢？ [And] the mother? (TI)
6	2	都係開心。 Also happy (other-extension)

4. Results

The analysis revealed participants' interaction patterns and their use of topic management skills, and further examined the effects of age and task type on these two features. This section presents the findings in relation to the three RQs.

4.1. Overall interaction patterns

Table 3 illustrates interaction patterns for all the participants when performing two types of tasks. The collaborative pattern was most frequently displayed (38.68%), followed by the dominant/passive pattern (29.25%) and dominant/dominant pattern (13.68%). Passive parallel (9.91%) and expert/novice (8.49%) were less often displayed. More than one-third of dyads displayed high equality and mutuality in interactions, and about another one-third demonstrated low equality and low mutuality. Supportive interactions accounted for approximately half of the interactions, whereas the remaining half exhibited unsupportive interaction patterns.

Table 3 Interaction patterns in two types of tasks

Interaction patterns	Frequency	Percentage
Collaborative	82	38.68%
Dominant/dominant	29	13.68%
Dominant/passive	62	29.25%
Expert/novice	18	8.49%
Passive parallel	21	9.91%

Note. The frequency represents the number of interactions elicited by the tasks

4.1.1. Collaborative

Excerpt 2 exemplifies a collaborative pattern during the performance of the STD task by two students. To save space, only the English translation was presented. It demonstrates how both speakers took turns requesting information, responding to each other, and elaborating on the topic of "the mother," indicating a high level of equality. They confirmed each other's information with phrases, such as "係呀, yes," and then expanded on the details about the person in lines 3-7, which exemplified their collaborative approach to determining the differences. The collaborative pattern was often accompanied by supportive body language, such as eye contact and inviting gestures (e.g., extending an open hand toward the interlocutor).

Excerpt 2 Example of a *collaborative* pattern (Pair 4-A1)

Lines	Students	Content
1.	2*	Is the shoe the little kid is holding in grandma's red color?
2.	1	Red?
3.	2	Yes, it's grandma, the red colour.
4.	1	Grandma? Yes, and her mommy's (referring to the little kid's mother), um, is it also[//] is it pink?
5.	2	Yes, and does it have a black dot on it? [like] Fermented black beans?
6.	1	Yes, and is she holding a cellphone? *[looking at 2, smiling]*
7.	2	Yes, is it black? *[looking at 1]*
8.	1	Yes
9.	2	Okay

Note. The code in parentheses indicates the school number and pair number

4.1.2. Dominant/dominant

In the dominant/dominant pattern, interlocutors contribute comparably to the task but seldom build on or incorporate their partners' ideas. In Excerpt 3, both speakers in the dyad took turns expressing their opinions on what should be brought to the trip, demonstrating a high level of equality. Mutuality, however, remained low. For instance, in line 7, S1 interrupted S2 before she completed her utterance.

Excerpt 3 Example of a *dominant/dominant* pattern (Pair 2-A5)

Lines	Students	Content
1.	1	this, (for things like) mosquito repellent water if you're going out=
2.	2	go[/]go that place (…)
3.	1	If you're going hiking, mosquito repellent (would be really useful)
4.	2	Yes[/]yes, and water, that[//]you go to that place it's important to bring water with you
5.	1	Also, bring . . . some sandwiches, bring other food, all[//]all are quite important, because if you suddenly get very hungry, you can eat them.
6.	2	Oh, and it's also important to have an umbrella, because[/]because if[/]if we go somewhere or that place is hot, we need to=
7.	1	=also bring a backpack, because[/]because we need to put other things in it. If not, if you carry everything at once, it's inconvenient, so bringing a backpack is more convenient.

Note. The code in parentheses indicates the school number and pair number

4.1.3. Dominant/passive

Excerpt 4 demonstrates an example of a dominant/passive pattern, characterized by moderate to low levels of equality and mutuality. One of the speakers in a pair primarily contributes to and controls the task, while the partner adopts a passive role. In lines 1, 3, 5, and 7, S1 asked questions to seek confirmation from her interlocutor. S2's responses were mainly MAs or other short-extensions, such as "seen it" and "erm," without adding new details. S2 did not take the initiative to ask questions or request confirmation, and S1 rarely invited S2 to describe his picture.

Excerpt 4 Example of a *dominant/passive* pattern (Pair 2-A2)

Lines	Students	Content
1.	1	Oh (.), have you seen a (.) mother and daughter?
2.	2	(Seen them) *[Look at 1]*
3.	1	(There are two beautiful girls), have you seen a door?
4.	2	Seen it *[Look at 1]*
5.	1	A boy
6.	2	Erm
7.	1	Drinking bubble milk tea
8.	2	No (…), *[look at 1]*

Note. The code in parentheses indicates the school number and pair number

4.1.4. Expert/novice

In the expert/novice pattern, the dominant speaker assumes the expert role, actively encouraging the passive speaker to engage with the task. In Excerpt 5, S1 produced substantial information. Nevertheless, she asked questions to elicit her partner's opinions in lines 1, 5, and 7. In response, S2 attempted to engage with the topic. Compared to her brief reply in line 2, she produced longer responses in lines

6 and 8, and was able to provide some reasons to support her opinion. The interaction was accompanied by supportive body language.

Excerpt 5 Example of an *expert/novice* pattern (Pair 1-A4)

Lines	Students	Content
1.	1	I[/]I want to bring a small fan, because, um, it will be very hot before it rains heavily. Do you want one too?
2.	2	I want
3.	1	I also want to bring a raincoat, because it will (rain heavily) later.
4.	2	(rain heavily)
5.	1	Do you want [to bring a raincoat] or not?
6.	2	Yes, I want to bring an umbrella, because I will bring an umbrella.
7.	1	(I want to bring an umbrella, because this umbrella, um, I [/] I can use it for anything. I can use it when it's hot, I can use it when it's raining[/]raining heavily (…). Do you want to bring water?
8.	2	I want to, because it's very hot.
9.	1	I also want to, because it's very hot (…) 75 dollars
10.	2	um

Note. The code in parentheses indicates the school number and pair number

4.1.5. Passive parallel

Passive parallel refers to the case in which both speakers in a dyad contribute passively to the task, demonstrating moderate to low degrees of equality and mutuality. In Excerpt 6, both speakers occasionally fell silent, which necessitated the student helper's reminders (lines 1, 4, and 6). After S1's utterance in line 1, a prolonged silence followed (line 3), which prompted the tester to remind S2 to respond. However, her description of her own picture was not treated as a response, but rather a new statement, indicating a lack of information exchange. During the task, they seldom made eye contact but stared at their own pictures instead.

Excerpt 6 Example of a *passive parallel* pattern (Pair 1-A1)

Lines	Students	Content
		Prolonged silence
1.	H	Or you can start first. You can talk about this part of the picture to her *[referring to the picture, guiding students to discuss the girl* in the lower right corner.
2.	1	There is a girl skating and playing in the park
3.		Prolonged silence
4.	H	Then you can answer her, is what she said correct?
5.	2	(…) This girl (is playing) skateboarding (…).
		Silence
6.	H	Remember, you need to find five different places, and pay attention to what the other person says. Then, continue to ask them questions and see where the differences are.
7.	1	ermm, I see a mother and her daughter going to Café de Coral for a meal.
8.	2	(###)
9.	H	Could you speak in a louder voice?
10.	2	(###)
11.	H	Ask him/her, discuss it among yourselves, I cannot tell you.

Note. H refers to the student helper. The code in parentheses indicates the school number and pair number

4.2. Impact of age on interaction patterns and topic management skills

As shown in Table 4 and Figure 1, Grade 6 students exhibited a higher percentage of collaborative patterns and expert/novice patterns compared to those in Grade 5. Meanwhile, Grade 5 students exhibited these patterns more frequently than Grade 4 students. By contrast, Grade 6 students demonstrated a lower percentage of dominant/passive than Grade 5 students, who exhibited this pattern less than the students in Grade 4. The percentage of dominant/dominant patterns was consistent among the three grades. These findings indicate that the students interact in a collaborative manner as age develops.

Table 4 Frequencies and percentages of interaction patterns across three grades

	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
Collaborative	21 (29.17%)	27 (39.71%)	34 (47.22%)
Dominant/dominant	10 (13.89%)	9 (13.24%)	10 (13.89%)
Dominant/passive	30 (41.67%)	18 (26.47%)	14 (19.44%)
Expert/novice	5 (6.94%)	5 (7.35%)	8 (11.11%)
Passive parallel	6 (8.33%)	9 (13.24%)	6 (8.33%)
Total	72 (100%)	68 (100%)	72 (100%)

Note. The frequency represents the number of interactions elicited by the tasks

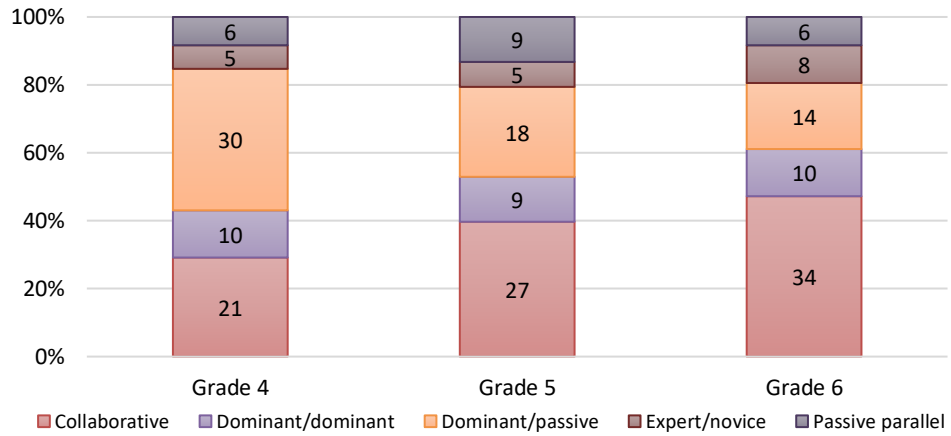

Figure 1 Frequencies and percentages of interaction patterns across three grades

The Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to compare the differences in topic management skills among the three grades. The statistics are shown in Table 5. For total frequencies and frequencies per 100 turns, no significant differences exist between the TIs (H = 1.275, df = 2, p = .529), MAs (H = 2.108, df = 2, p = .348), self-extensions (H = 0.895, df = 2, p = .639), other-extensions (H = 3.230, df = 2, p = .199), or short other-extensions (H = 0.473, df = 2, p = .790) amongst three grades.

Table 5 Topic management skills across three grades

Variable	Grade 4			Grade 5			Grade 6			*p*	*r*
	N	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*M*	*SD*		
Turns	20	195.80	85.88	17	237.23	121.98	18	228.05	76.88	.473	.036
Characters	20	1575.15	769.50	17	2073.82	1131.76	18	1918.83	1098.12	.399	.045
TI	20	58.30	24.68	17	78.82	35.24	18	65.17	19.16	.200	.095
		(30.35)	+(9.53)		(35.98)	(14.79)		(30.46)	(9.70)	(.529)	(.051)
MA	20	37.70	29.73	17	54.18	39.46	18	45.44	19.98	.383	.049
		(16.81)	(10.59)		(21.54)	(12.49)		(20.28)	(5.97)	(.348)	(.041)
Self-extension	20	24.75	17.69	17	32.29	23.03	18	32.61	20.29	.449	.034
		(11.44)	(5.75)		(13.02)	(6.82)		(13.33)	(5.38)	(.639)	(.021)
Short	20	11.60	10.78	17	16.06	12.92	18	12.94	9.63	.579	.028
other-extension		(5.52)	(4.92)		(6.51)	(4.61)		(5.21)	(3.71)	(.790)	(.015)
Other-extension	20	32.80	22.89	17	51.35	46.06	18	51.17	30.43	.144	.068
		(15.52)	(7.50)		(18.38)	(10.30)		(21.06)	(8.40)	(.199)	(.068)

Note. The number outside parentheses represents the raw frequencies, while the number in parentheses refers to the frequencies per 100 turns

4.3. Impact of task type on interaction patterns and topic management skills

Table 6 and Figure 2 show that the percentages of collaborative and expert/novice patterns were higher in the STD tasks than in the decision-making tasks. In contrast, the percentages of passive parallel and dominant/passive were lower in the STD tasks compared to the decision-making tasks. The percentage of dominant/dominant was consistent between the two types of tasks. Eight dyads changed from collaborative in STD tasks to dominant/dominant, dominant/passive, and passive parallel in decision-making tasks, and four dyads changed from expert/novice in STD tasks to dominant/dominant and dominant/passive in decision-making tasks. These findings suggest that the students tended to collaborate more with each other in the STD tasks than they did in the decision-making tasks.

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicated that there were significant differences in measures of topic management skills between the two types of tasks (see Table 7). The STD tasks produced significantly more turns (STD: $M = 69.86$, $SD = 29.59$ vs. decision-making: $M = 42.95$, $SD = 23.07$; $p < .001$, $r = .536$) and more target language as measured in terms of Chinese characters in the transcripts (STD: $M = 585.10$, $SD = 282.96$ vs. decision-making: $M = 371.03$, $SD = 264.41$; $p < .001$, $r = .503$) than the decision-making tasks, with large effect sizes. This indicates that STD tasks elicited more use of the target language than the decision-making tasks.

The significant differences were also identified in terms of MAs, short other-extensions, and other-extensions. The total frequencies of MAs and frequencies per 100 turns were lower in the decision-making tasks (total: $M = 6.47$, $SD = 5.59$; per 100 turns: $M = 14.34$, $SD = 9.93$) than in the STD tasks (total: $M = 16.75$, $SD = 11.73$; per 100 turns: $M = 22.23$, $SD = 13.21$), with medium to large effect sizes (total: $p < .001$, $r = .518$; per 100 turns: $p < .001$, $r = .380$). Furthermore, the STD

tasks (total: *M* = 5.61, *SD* = 4.99; per 100 turns: *M* = 7.43, *SD* = 6.21) triggered significantly more short other-extensions (total: *M* = 1.25, *SD* = 1.22; per 100 turns: *M* = *2*.66, *SD* = 2.32 for decision-making tasks) with large effect sizes (total: *p* < .001, *r* = .551; per 100 turns: *p* < .001, *r* = .520), and more other-extensions (total: *M* = 15.74, *SD* = 11.38; per 100 turns: *M* = 20.32, *SD* = 9.61) than the decision-making tasks (total: *M* = 7.04, *SD* = 8.00; per 100 turns: *M* = 13.94, *SD* = 10.43) with medium to large effect sizes (total: *p* < .001, *r* = .523; per 100 turns: *p* < .001, *r* = .390). These findings suggest that the students tended to elaborate on interlocutors' topics more in STD tasks than in the decision-making tasks.

Table 6 Frequencies and percentages of interaction patterns between two task types

Interaction patterns	STD	Decision-making
Collaborative	45 (42.06%)	37 (35.24%)
Dominant/dominant	15 (14.02%)	14 (13.33%)
Dominant/passive	27 (25.23%)	35 (33.33%)
Expert/novice	11 (10.28%)	7 (6.67%)
Passive parallel	9 (8.41%)	12 (11.43%)
Total	107 (100%)	105 (100%)

Note. The frequency represents the number of interactions elicited by the tasks

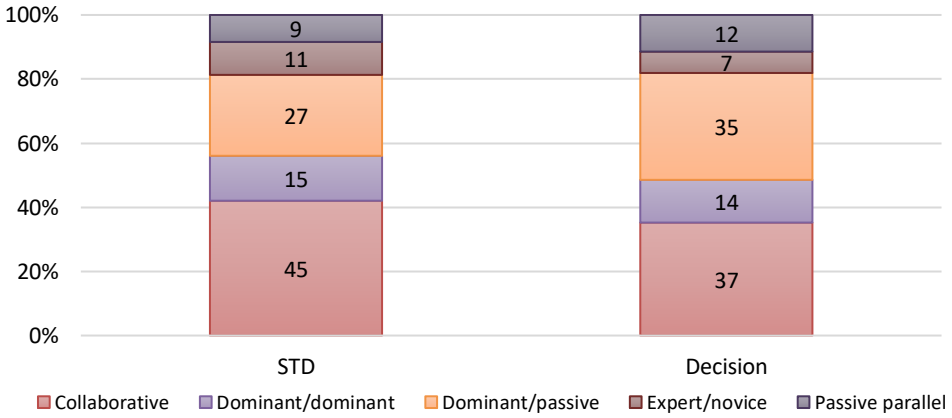

Figure 2 Frequencies and percentages of interaction patterns between two task types

Table 7 Topic management skills between two task types

Variable	STD			Decision-making			*p*	*r*
	N	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*M*	*SD*		
Turns	53	69.86	29.59	53	42.95	23.07	<.001	.536
Characters	53	585.10	282.96	53	371.03	264.41	<.001	.503
TI	53	20.70 (32.01)	7.91 (12.66)	53	13.79 (33.66)	7.86 (13.78)	<.001 (.186)	.460 (.129)
MA	53	16.75 (22.23)	11.73 (13.21)	53	6.47 (14.34)	5.59 (9.93)	<.001 (<.001)	.518 (.380)
Self-extension	53	9.74 (12.34)	7.51 (6.88)	53	5.42 (12.86)	3.99 (8.89)	<.001 (.881)	.406 (.015)
Other-short-extension	53	5.61 (7.43)	4.99 (6.21)	53	1.25 (2.66)	1.22 (2.32)	<.001 (<.001)	.551 (.520)
Other-extension	53	15.74 (20.32)	11.38 (9.61)	53	7.04 (13.94)	8.00 (10.43)	<.001 (<.001)	.523 (.390)

Note. The number outside parentheses represents the raw frequencies, while the number in parentheses refers to the frequencies per 100 turns. Only raw frequencies are shown for turns and Chinese characters

5. Discussion

This study aimed to identify the interaction patterns among young CSL learners and to examine the influence of age and task type on their interactions. The results revealed all five interaction patterns amongst young CSL learners. Amongst all tasks, the participants most commonly displayed the collaborative pattern, followed by the dominant/passive pattern. Regarding the age-related differences, an increase in the use of collaborative patterns and a decrease in dominant/passive patterns from Grade 4 to Grade 6 emerged. Grade 6 showed a slightly higher proportion of the expert/novice pattern than the other two age groups, whereas Grade 5 demonstrated a higher proportion of passive parallel. However, no significant differences existed between the TIs, MAs, self-extensions, other-extensions, and short other-extensions across the three grades. As for the impact of task type, the percentages of collaborative and expert/novice patterns were higher in the required information exchange tasks (i.e., STD) than in the optional information exchange tasks (i.e., decision-making). Additionally, the required information exchange tasks triggered significantly more turns, the target language, short other-extensions, and other-extensions than the optional information exchange tasks.

5.1. What are the overall interaction patterns among young learners of CSL (RQ1)?

Consistent with the findings in the literature on young English language learners (e.g., Ahmadian & Tajabadi, 2017; Butler & Zeng, 2015; Oliver & Azkarai, 2019), young CSL learners predominantly exhibited the collaborative pattern. This finding suggests that young CSL learners are able to mutually engage in oral interactions despite their diverse L1 and cultural backgrounds. Yet, this study found a lower percentage of this pattern (38.68%) compared to Oliver and Azkarai (2019), who identified 45.31% in 9-12-year-old ESL learners and Butler and Zeng (2014, 2015), who reported 96% for Grade 6 EFL learners in China. This suggests that about two thirds of the young CSL students in Hong Kong do not know how to engage in oral interactions. The second largest category was dominant/passive, which indicates that one of the speakers controls and navigates the conversation over the other, suggesting low levels of mutuality and equality. This finding challenges the assumption that young CSL students in Hong Kong would naturally acquire interactional skills because the local community offers ample opportunities for them to access and engage in the target language (Office of the Ombudsman, 2019). As Hong Kong has implemented the “biliteracy and trilingualism” policy (Hong Kong Government, 1997), schools may adopt English, Cantonese, or Mandarin Chinese as the medium of instruction. Consequently, many of the students can

communicate in both English and Chinese. Thus, it cannot be assumed that CSL students engage deeply in Chinese communication or that they naturally optimize the environment for language development. This contextual factor may explain the lower percentage of the collaborative pattern compared to those found in the literature.

5.2. What is the impact of age on their interaction patterns and topic management skills (RQ2)?

The analysis revealed an increase in collaborative patterns and a decrease in dominant/passive patterns from Grade 4 to Grade 6. This indicates that older children are more capable of engaging in supportive interaction patterns. Such findings corroborate Oliver et al. (2017) and Butler and Zeng (2014, 2015), revealing an age-related developmental trend. However, in terms of interactional characteristics, the descriptive statistics indicated that Grade 6 children used slightly more other-extensions than the other two grades. That said, no significant difference was identified. The consistent topic management skills across three grades demonstrated that children's ability to use discourse skills to mutually develop a topic does not necessarily improve with age. This contrasts with Butler and Zeng (2014), who reported that Grade 6 children used significantly more communicative functions to extend others' topics than Grade 4 students. One reason is that, although Grade 6 children displayed more collaborative and expert/novice patterns than Grades 4 and 5, the rise in numbers was slight. Therefore, no significant differences were observed at discourse level, as manifested in terms of short other-extensions and other-extensions. It is often assumed that, with increasing age, factors such as language proficiency, perspective-taking ability, and social exposure collectively enhance children's ability to co-construct a conversation (e.g., Azkarai & Kopinska, 2020; Bulter & Zeng, 2015; Pinter, 2007). However, oral interaction is cognitively and linguistically challenging (Goh, 2017). Fostering interactional skills requires systematic scaffolding and ample opportunities for practice, particularly for young learners using an L2 (Goh, 2017; Goh & Burns, 2012). However, instructional practices for CSL students in Hong Kong emphasize literacy and examination-oriented skills, particularly in writing Chinese characters (Cong et al., 2012; Wang & Tsung, 2022; Xie et al., 2012). Therefore, due to the absence of systematic oral instruction and practice, students' topic management skills in Cantonese may not have shown significant development across different age groups.

5.3. What is the impact of task type on their interaction patterns and topic management skills (RQ3)?

The study contributes to the literature (Gass et al., 2005; Gilabert et al., 2009; Kaivanpanah & Miri, 2017) by exploring the effects of task type on interaction patterns and topic management skills among young CSL learners. Previous studies, such as Gass et al. (2005) and Gilabert et al. (2009), suggest that required information exchange tasks induce significantly more negotiation of meaning strategies than the optional information exchange tasks, thereby creating a conducive environment for language learning. The current study found that the required information exchange tasks elicited more expert/novice and collaborative patterns than the optional information exchange tasks and triggered significantly more short other-extensions and other-extensions than the optional information exchange tasks. These results suggest that compulsory information exchange facilitates collaboration and mutual topic development, thereby having potential benefits for promoting peer learning and knowledge co-construction. This effect can be attributed to the nature of required information exchange tasks in which information is distributed among interlocutors and communication becomes necessary for task completion. Such task design is particularly important for young L2 learners whose cognitive and linguistic resources may not yet enable them to automatically co-construct extended interaction. In this context, externally structured information distribution plays a crucial role in driving collaboration. This principle carries important pedagogical implications and highlights the instructional value of carefully designed information-gap tasks in young learner L2 classrooms.

5.4. Pedagogical implications

Vygotsky (1978, 1986) argues that knowledge is constructed through interactions, highlighting the role of social interaction in both learning and cognitive development. Based on this argument, many scholars have explored the dynamics of interaction to reveal its characteristics and examine its impact on learning. Prior research (e.g., Chen, 2017; Poupore, 2016; Storch, 2002) indicates that interactions can be beneficial for learning, but their effectiveness often depends on the extent to which students collaborate with each other. Along this line, the study examined interaction patterns and topic management skills among young CSL learners in Hong Kong. The findings suggest that the quality of oral interactions among young CSL learners needs to be enhanced.

In light of these findings, the study has the following pedagogical implications. First, the teaching practice should place greater emphasis on developing learners'

interactional skills. Teachers are recommended to take an active role by providing explicit instruction and modeling effective topic management skills. This can be achieved by demonstrating conversational exchanges and guiding students to reflect on how interlocutors question, respond to, and elaborate on each other's topics in order to sustain and mutually develop a topic. Second, students should be given opportunities to practice these interactional skills. Communicative tasks are particularly recommended as the findings suggest that such tasks can elicit a wide range of interactional skills, thereby creating chances for practice.

Additionally, the present study highlights the importance of employing required information exchange tasks for young CSL learners, as opposed to the oral activities frequently presented in the textbooks, such as picture descriptions and picture-based storytelling. These activities often need optional information exchange, which the study found to be less effective in facilitating collaboration or mutual topic development. Therefore, teachers can create gaps by splitting the information and distributing it to individual students, encouraging them to collaborate and complete the task together. These tasks are likely to elicit extended conversations, thus creating opportunities for learners to practice the target language as well as progressively develop their interactional competence.

6. Conclusion

The study examined oral interactions amongst young learners of CSL, which contributed to the literature by investigating interaction patterns and interactional characteristics in an underexplored group of learners in an Asian context. Furthermore, the study examined age-related differences and the impact of task type on their interactions. The study determined that the most frequently used pattern was collaborative, followed by dominant/passive. The required information exchange tasks had a positive impact on interaction patterns and topic management skills. Thus, they should be encouraged in classroom practice for young L2 learners. As for age-related differences, there was an increase in the use of collaborative patterns and a decrease in dominant/passive patterns with older students. However, no significant differences existed between the measures of topic management skills among the three grades from a micro-level perspective. This indicates a need for explicit instruction on topic management skills for young learners.

The study should be considered as a preliminary exploration of young L2 learners of CSL due to a limited sample size, and the findings should therefore be interpreted with caution. Additionally, the study did not examine affective or cognitive factors that may shape learners' interaction patterns or topic management skills. For young learners in particular, variables such as metalinguistic awareness,

task engagement, and motivation may also influence their interacting processes. Furthermore, the study adopted a cross-sectional design and therefore did not capture the developmental trajectory of oral interaction over time or its potential contribution to language development. Future research may adopt a longitudinal design to examine how affective and cognitive factors shape young learners' oral interaction over time, as well as investigating how oral interaction contributes to language development.

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APPENDIX

Transcription conventions

(.)	Short pause
(…)	Long pause
(###)	Unclear content
(how to say)	Guessing content
橙	Stress
↑	Rising intonation
[ ]	Overlap
=	Interruptions
[/]	Full repetition
[//]	Partial repetition
[laugh]	Non-verbal behaviour