

The role of interaction in second language acquisition.

Anita Muho

Aida Kurani

University "Aleksander Moisiu "Durrës, Albania.

Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of interaction and its role in second language acquisition. The role of "interaction" in L2 learning has long been a controversial issue. By explaining the definition of input and interaction hypothesis, the paper elaborates the theory that both input and interactional modifications facilitate second language acquisition. This study will focus on a case study which determines the importance of interaction in language acquisition. The results indicated that a considerable number of students consider interaction in language acquisition as a key factor. The findings of this empirical study, the review of literature as well as students experiences provide useful suggestions concerning the ways of promoting interaction in language acquisition.

Keywords; Acquisition, importance, interaction, language, negotiation.

Introduction

This study aims at analyzing the role of interaction in second language acquisition and how to promote it in second language classrooms. Research on interaction is conducted within the framework of the Interactive Hypothesis, which states that conversational interaction "facilitates language acquisition because it connects input (what learners hear and read); internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention; and output (what learners produce) in productive ways" (Long, 1996, pp. 451-452). Interaction provides learners with opportunities to receive comprehensible input

and feedback (Gass, 1997; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994) as well as to make changes in their own linguistic output (Swain, 1995).

The studies in this paper have tested empirically the hypothesis of interaction and its role in SLA. Interaction has attracted more interest in the second language acquisition (SLA) research in the last decade. Attention to pedagogical processes is responsible in part for that growing interest in studying the influence of interaction on second language acquisition.

Second language acquisition theories on the role of interaction

The focus of language acquisition theories have traditionally been on 'nurture' and 'nature' distinctions, advanced by the social-interactionist and nativist camps respectively.

Social-interactionists see language as a rule-governed cultural activity learned in interaction with others, while nativists perceive language ability as an innate capacity to generate syntactically correct sentences. In other words, interactionists believe environmental factors are more dominant in language acquisition, while nativists believe inborn factors are more dominant.

Vygotsky laid the foundation for the interactionists view of language acquisition. According to Vygotsky, social interaction plays an important role in the learning process and proposed the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where learners construct the new language through socially mediated interaction (Brown, p. 287).

On the other hand, nativists' such as Krashen assume that natural internal mechanisms operate upon comprehensible input which leads to language competence. This is evident in Krashen's input hypothesis of SLA. Krashen's input hypothesis was first proposed over 30 years ago, expanding from Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device. Since that time, there have been many theories put forward under influence Krashen's input hypothesis.

Although Vygotsky and Krashen can be categorized into distinct positions, the application of their theories to second language teaching shares a number of similarities. According to Krashen's input hypothesis, language acquisition takes place during human interaction in the target language environment. The learner is then

exposed to rich comprehensible input in the target language. However, in order for acquisition to occur, the input would need to be slightly beyond the learner's current level of linguistic competence.

Both Vygotsky and Krashen put great emphasis on the role of interaction in SLA, Long among other interactionists, also believes in the importance of comprehensive input. His interaction hypothesis also stresses the importance of comprehensible input as a major factor in second language acquisition; however, he also believes that interactive input is more important than non-interactive input. In addition, Long stresses the significance of interactional modifications which occur in the negotiating meaning when communication problems arise (Ellis, 1994

The major distinction between interactionist and nativist theories of SLA is that scholars such as Krashen emphasize comprehensible target language input which is one-way input and, on the contrary, interactionists acknowledge the importance of two-way communication in the target language (Ariza and Hancock, 2003).

Interactionists agree that Krashen's comprehensible input is a crucial element in the language acquisition process, but their emphasis is on how input is made comprehensible (Lightbown and Spada, 1998, p. 29). Moreover, Krashen distinguishes between language acquisition and language learning. This study will focus primarily on the interaction hypothesis proposed by Long and will highlight the main claims advanced by Long and discuss them critically in light of other competing perspectives on SLA and consider its EFL pedagogical implications.

The definition of input and interaction hypothesis

In the interactional approach to L2 input proposed by Long (e.g., 1981), input is defined as "*the linguistic forms (morphemes, words, utterances)—the streams of speech in the air—directed at the non-native speaker*" (Long, 1983, p.127), whereas the "*analysis of interaction means describing the functions of those forms in (conversational) discourse*" (Long, 1983, p.127).

Long justified the distinction on the basis that in L2 input one may find modification in the linguistic forms (e.g., deletion of morphemes marking tense), in the interaction (e.g. confirmation checks or self-repetitions), in both, or in neither. His work

(1981, 1983) revealed that in NS-NNS interactions, NSs modified their interactions more often and more consistently than they did the input.

The input and interaction hypothesis combines an argument regarding the importance of input comprehension to SLA (Krashen's input hypothesis) and an argument for the value of modifications to discourse structure for learner comprehension (Long's interaction hypothesis).

Long deductively argues that modifications to discourse structure (e.g., negotiated interaction and modified input) indirectly facilitate SLA.

The Interaction Hypothesis

The Interaction Hypothesis states that interaction facilitates SLA because conversational and linguistic modifications that occur in discourse provide learners with necessary comprehensible linguistic input. This approach is credited to Long (1996), who sought a way to bring together two major approaches in SLA:

Hatch (1978) recognized the importance of conversation on the development of grammar.

Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, a cognitive theory that stresses the importance of linguistic input in the target language (TL) that is slightly more advanced than what the learner has mastery of. The current state of a learner's rule-based linguistic knowledge is designated as "i", while the slightly more advanced input is "i+1".

Krashen's sees the relevance of social contextual factors as conversational gambits in securing more input for the learner, which eventually relate to the notion of an affective filter that is said to determine what input gets through to the brain's central language acquisition mechanism (Allwright, 1995).

Long believes that what makes input to be comprehensible is modified interaction, or negotiation of meaning. In Krashen's input hypothesis, comprehensible input itself remains the main causal variable, while Long claims that a crucial element in the language acquisition process is the modified input that learners are exposed to and the way in which other speakers interact in conversations with learners. (Lightbown and Spada, 1993).

Long (1983, cited in Gass, 2002) investigates conversations between a native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) and proposes his interaction hypothesis as follows:

Negotiation for meaning, and especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the NS or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways. (cited in Gass, 2002, p. 174).

In other words, interactional adjustments make input comprehensible, and comprehensible input promotes acquisition, thus interactional adjustments promote acquisition (Lightbown and Spada, 1993, p.30). Long believes that when meaning is negotiated, input comprehensibility is usually increased and learners tend to focus on salient linguistic features (Ariza and Hancock, 2003). Carroll (2000) also summarizes Long's Interaction hypothesis as follows:

-This feedback draws the learner's attention to mismatches between the input and the learner's output (p.291).

-Negotiation of meaning leads to modified interaction, which consists of various modifications that native speakers or other interlocutors make in order to render their input comprehensible to learners. For example, native speakers in a conversation with non-native speakers often slow their speech down, speaking more deliberately. This kind of language modification by native speakers addressing to language learners is sometimes referred as foreigner discourse (FD). Modifications identified in FD vary significantly depending on individual factors such as speech style, the discourse, social and cultural contexts. In FD, for example, it is reported that individual utterances tend to be shorter and syntactically less complex, more frequent and concrete vocabulary is used while slang and idioms are avoided, NSs tend to restate information using synonyms, etc. At the discourse level, modifications include feedbacks such as recasts, comprehension checks, clarification requests, self-repetition or paraphrase, restatement and expansion of NNS statement and topic switches (Wesche, 1994; Brown, 2000; Lightbown and Spada, 1998). An example of clarification request is as follows (Gass, 2002, p.174):

NS: there's there's just a couple of more things NNS: a sorry? Couple? NS: couple more things in the room only just a couple NNS: Couple? What does it mean couple?

Long claims that these modifications can provide greater transparency of semantic or syntactic relationships for learners, and he further proposes that

interactional modifications may be the crucial factor in facilitating comprehension by non-NSs. (Wesche, 1994).

Study methodology

Purpose of the Research: To determine the role of interaction in language acquisition and how to promote it in second language classroom.

Subjects: The study was conducted at the Faculty of Education, in “Aleksandër Moisiu” University, Durrës. The subjects in the study consisted of 97 students of English language branch. They were 20 (20.62 %) male and 77 (79.38%) female students. Their ages ranged from 18 to 30, with an average age of 23. The group consisted of 22 first (22.68%), 26 (26.80%) second, 29 (29.90%) third and 20 (20.62%) fourth year students.

Method and Data Collection:

The instrument used to collect descriptive data was a questionnaire that consisted of two parts. The first part was intended to collect personal information of the participants, such as their age, gender, and year at university. The second part was a question survey. Lastly, to investigate into participants' attributions of the causes and effects interaction, three questions were designed, which are as follows:

1. Is interaction related to second language acquisition? How?
2. Which types of interaction promote second language acquisition?
3. Which are the positive effects of negotiation in language acquisition?

Data Analysis;

Based on the answers compiled from the first question of the survey, it was found that the nature of interaction and the role of the learner are critical factors along with the type of structure that may be affected through interaction. The feature that interacts with the learner internal factors to facilitate development is the participation in the interaction through which the condition is provided for the negotiation of meaning. The students consider the importance of interaction in second language acquisition as follows: 50 students claimed that they have better results when they have positive opportunities to express their personal meanings, 25 students claimed that they need a full range of contexts that cater for a full performance in the language, while 22 students

claimed that they need a creative context of language use which helps them to participate in activities that are beyond their level of proficiency.

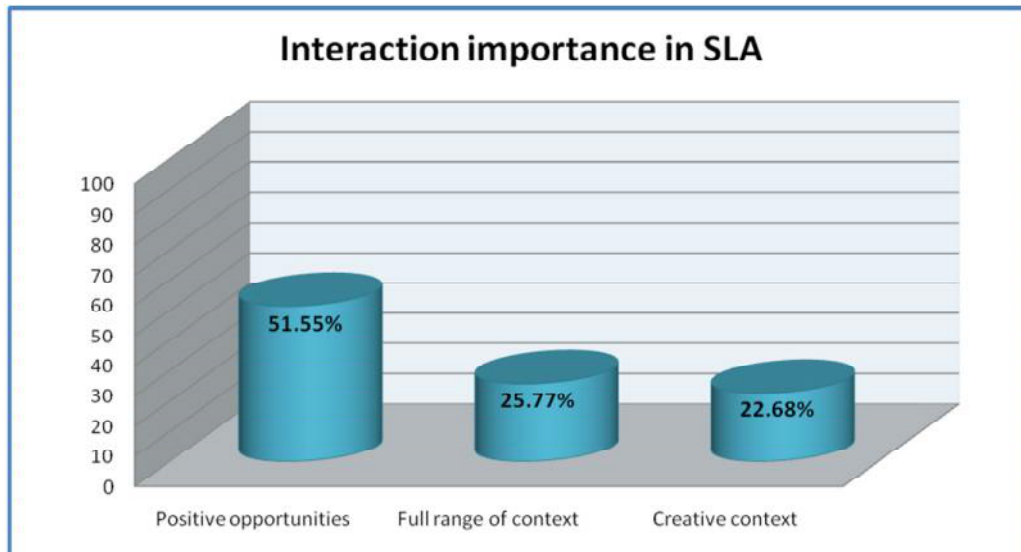


Fig. Interaction importance in SLA

Concerning the second question of the survey, the results show that the interactional features promote SLA. There is a link between interaction and learning with a focus on three major components of interaction: exposure (input), production (output), and feedback. Speakers in conversations negotiate meaning. In the case of conversations between learners and others, this negotiation will lead to the provision of either direct or indirect forms of feedback, including correction, comprehension checks, clarification requests, topic shifts, repetitions, and recasts. Optimizing the interaction implies improving the quantity and quality of input, production, and feedback.

Lastly, the results of this research show that positive effects of negotiation of meaning and pushed output are said to have the following effects on second language acquisition:

- It helps to promote communication.
- It facilitates learning as it helps noticing a 'gap' between received input and the learner's output
- It enables learners to receive feedback through direct and indirect evidence
- Recall of the relevant item will be enhanced.
- It helps acquisition at least where vocabulary is concerned.
- Clarification requests facilitate learners to produce output modifications

-Pushing learners to produce more comprehensible output may have a long-term effect.

Conclusion

The results of this research study show that if teachers try to provide opportunities for oral discussion in their classes, encourage learners to initiate topics and put some responsibility on the part of their learners, the class would be enjoyable, creative and initiative. For those students who are either reserved or reluctant to participate in the classroom, the teacher can directly ask them to speak rather than wait for their responses.

The findings show that interaction can have positive effects on L2 development and that the complex matter of individual differences needs to be considered carefully. The many questions surrounding the study of interaction, development, and L2 learners suggest that this area will continue to provide challenges as well as insights into our understanding of the processes involved in SLA.

Another conclusion may be the fact that language is a sign of creativity and the ability to conform form of language to appropriate setting is one realization of this creativity. Through interaction and interpersonal relationships, creative language use plays an important role as the learners engage in discussion to meet the mutual understanding. If we are to claim that our language learning is meaningful, it should be embedded in conversation.

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