

INTERACTION IS THE KEY TO SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Interaction is the key to second language learning. The interactionist view of language learning is that language acquisition is the result of an interaction between the learner's mental abilities and the linguistic environment. The studies of foreigner talk and teacher talk have been conducted in lieu with the role of input and interaction in both the natural and classroom settings. The learning of a language centres around the use of the language for communicative purposes.

INTERACTION AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Interaction is the key to second language learning. Ellis (1985) defines interaction as the discourse jointly constructed by the learner and his interlocutors and input is the result of interaction. The interactionist view of language learning is that language acquisition is the result of an interaction between the learner's mental abilities and the linguistic environment. Long (1990) as cited in Ellis (1994) proposed that interaction is necessary for the second language acquisition. According to him, three aspects of verbal interaction can be distinguished: input, production and feedback. Input is the language offered to the learner by native speakers or other learners, production (output) is the language spoken by the language learners themselves and feedback is the response given by the conversational partners to the production of the learner.

The studies of foreigner talk and teacher talk have been conducted in lieu with the role of input and interaction in both the natural and classroom settings. Native speakers modify their speech when communicating with learners. These modifications are evident in both input and interaction. Long's (1990) as cited in Ellis (1994) interaction hypothesis emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input and claims that it is most effective when it is modified through the negotiation of meaning. Gass and Varonis (1994) have found that native speaker modifications are more frequent in two-way communication because conversation provides the native speaker with feedback from the learner and thus enables him to estimate the amount of adjustment required. Hatch (1983) suggests that foreigner talk has the same basic functions as motherese whereby it promotes communication, establishes an affective bond between native speaker and learner and serves as an implicit mode of teaching.

In the natural setting, for the learner to communicate, he must learn the language and in order to learn it he must communicate. For example the Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia do not have formal instruction in Bahasa Malaysia but are able to function well in their workplace and the community. Their second language is acquired through sporadic and unsystematic social interaction with the broader society. The learner has access to the target language in the course of everyday communication or interaction with the environment. The sounds of the language are embedded in a relevant situational context and the learner's job is to extract from this material the rules for the use of the language. This interaction allows him to start learning and learning in turn allows him to make progress in communication.

The analysis of classroom discourse has focused on the exchanges in which the teacher initiates, the learner responds, and the teacher supplies feedback (also known as IRF). McTear (1975, as cited in Ellis, 1985) has shown that IRF structure is often modified when required. It could take the form of IRF(R) when the learner believes that the teacher is modeling an utterance that requires further responses. According to Krashen's (1987) input hypothesis, in order for second language acquisition to take place, the learner needs comprehensible input that contains models of the language and therefore input must consist of 'i + 1'. The language class supplies the input so that learners progress in language acquisition and understand "real" language to a certain extent through interaction with the teacher and other learners. Input can be made more comprehensible by interaction since the learners can negotiate their comprehension by requesting and producing modifications.

As ESL teachers, we practice scaffolding as in Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) defines Zone of Proximal Development as "the distance between actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers". Hence, this gives direct and crucial interactive role to the teacher. Vygotsky's theory suggests that teachers need to do more than just provide or arrange the environment for learners to discover on their own. The learner should be guided by explanations, demonstrations, rephrasing and work with other learners and provided with opportunity for cooperative learning. In addition, they should be encouraged to organize their thinking and to talk about what they are trying to accomplish. All these involve interactions with the teacher and peers in the classroom. An implication of Vygotsky's ZPD is that learners should be put in situations where they have to reach to understand but where support from other learners or from the teacher is also available. Through interaction there will be progress in learning the second language.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to say that interaction is a recursive process. The learner receives input from his/her interlocutor and that input becomes intake when the learner processes the information internally. The learner then produces the output which in turn becomes the input for the interlocutor and he/she provides feedback to that input. And this process continues as conversation or communication and therefore enhances second language learning. As an ESL teacher and a second language learner, I believe that interaction is the key to second language learning. Second language learners need comprehensible input, need to be in situations that provide maximum personal involvement in the communication and need opportunities to use the target language in social interactions. The learning of a language centres around the use of the language for communicative purposes.

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