

How Interaction Mechanism Enhances English Language Learning: An Overview

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Abdul Rasheed P

Research Scholar & Assistant Professor, EMEA College of Arts and Science, Kondotty, Kerala, India

Abstract

Employing various methods for learning English as a second language has been the focus of many studies in English Language Teaching (ELT). In a multi-cultural society, people are naturally exposed to other languages in their surroundings, apart from their first language. Some parents are naturally bilingual, thereby exposing their children to acquiring two or more languages. Some second language learners improve their language skills through various means including interactions, either with fellow students or with the teachers in the classroom situation. There are many factors that impact English language Learning. This immediate study focuses on the impact of the interaction mechanism in the enhancement of the learning of English as a second language. The main focus is on the interaction approaches, discussing theories that have been developed in the study of interaction as a second language mechanism, and an overview of the impact of the theories in practical terms. The study utilized simple qualitative approach, and data was collated through secondary sources. The discussion was carried out descriptively. Findings were made in the analysis. The main component of the analysis is based on the discovery that interaction has remained a vital factor in the learning of English as a second language. The interaction was proven to remain a basic technique frequently implemented to enhance learning in the English language teaching (ELT) classroom. The study also established that interaction helps to figure out the real challenges of the students in acquiring a second language, mainly in the classroom. Consistent interaction, which directly engages the students in the learning process, was proven to trigger teachers to expedite suitable methods to inculcate behavioral changes among learners.

Keywords

Interaction, English as a Second Language, Classroom Learning, Second Language Learning, Interaction Impact, Communication in Class, Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT).

1. Introduction

English is taught as a second language across various countries. It is the official language of the countries colonized by British administrators. English can be acquired as a second language either simultaneously or sequentially. Many children across the

* Correspondence: Email: rasheedbavu@gmail.com

world are exposed to English as a second language while they acquire the first or native language at home. At the same time, English is taught in the classroom as a second language. Various factors are considered in terms of what motivates or impacts the learning of English as a second language in the classroom.

Among many techniques that enhance the learning of English as a second language, interaction has remained relevant. Interaction remains a basic technique usually implemented to enhance learning in the English language teaching (ELT) classroom. A plethora of studies indicated that there is a great level of relationship that exists between classroom interaction techniques and students' English language learning performance (Moss & Feldman, 2003; Wang & Castro, 2010; Odu, Odigwe, & Ekpenyong, 2013). Following the propositions of the interaction hypothesis theory, the development of communicative competence can easily be accelerated by interaction and communication in the classroom (Long, 1984). Interaction brings out an open exposure to communication and thereby acquiring the second language skills at an enhanced rate among the students in a minimum span of time. It also helps figure out the real problems of the students in acquiring a second language. It triggers teachers to expedite suitable methods to inculcate behavioral changes among learners. Interaction contributes immensely in the learning of English as a second language in the classroom. Peer-group interactions are getting dominated in most of the twenty-first century ELT classrooms. The contemporary curriculum focuses on social skills like interpersonal, group work, motivation, and empathy along with learning the second language.

The lack of interaction inside language classrooms results in poor learning. Long (1984), who is usually referred to as the founder of interactionism in English language learning, argues that lack of interaction is a reason for slow communicative competence in the English language in the ELT class. The effectiveness of interaction is often governed by teachers' and learners' intentions, actions, attitudes, and motivations. There are so many techniques employed to enhance communicative competence in language classrooms. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Collaborative learning, role-plays, interviews, games, pair-work, surveys, etc are the techniques used to enhance interactions. ELT in India in particular and across other countries where English is taught as a second language, is largely embracing the Communicative Approach today to promote English language Learning.

2.0. Review of Related Literature

The learning of a second language by an individual requires intensive study, commitment and deliberate memorization of the grammar of the second language. The acquisition of a second language in a class setting requires extensive commitment, deliberate efforts, a proper teaching environment, and professional

teachers, among other pertinent issues. Second language teaching and learning is a bidirectional effort, requiring the input of teachers and learners for effective acquisition. However, Maleke (2014) concluded that it is out of place to state that an FL (Foreign Language Learner) could aspire to attain a native-like competence in the second language when it is learned mainly in a classroom setting.

For emphasis, interaction in the classroom refers to the conversation between teachers and students, as well as among the students, in which active participation and learning of the students become vital. Conversations are part of the socio-cultural activities through which students construct knowledge collaboratively. Conversations between and among various parties in the classroom have been referred to as educational talk (Mercer and Dawes, 2008) or “exploratory talk” and “presentational talk” (Barnes, 2008:5). Presentational talk is the one-way lecture conducted by the teachers in the classroom which contributes little to encouraging and engaging students in a communicative dialogue. Exploratory talk is a purposeful conversation, often deliberately designed by teachers, which provide opportunities to students to engage in “hesitant, broken, and full of dead end” conversations enabling them to “try out new ideas, to hear how they sound, to see what others make of them, to arrange information and ideas into different patterns” (Barnes, 2008:5). Given the limited linguistic resources the EFL students possess in their school years, these hesitant, broken and dead-end conversations could be developed into spontaneous conversational skills. When students engage in interactions, they produce “symmetric dialogic context” (Mercer & Dawes, 2008:66) where everyone can participate, get respected and get the decisions made jointly. Students’ participation in interactions, therefore, can help them enrich their linguistic resources and build their confidence to communicate with others in English.

In the submission of Mercer and Dawes (2008: 69), interaction as used by learners with their teacher is really fundamental, both in spoken and/or written form. Significantly, the emphasis is on students’ engagement in real communication and integrating the forms learnt through interaction (Long & Robinson 1998). In the communication model, second language (L2) classrooms are students-centered activities where they practice (L2) through authentic communication. Students are exposed to spoken and written discourse, which reflects real communication, like writing a CV, or role playing an interview. Student- centered classroom offers more chance for the teacher to positively react to the learning styles and needs of his learners in a practical way. Additionally, the instruction is based on the teacher in terms of transforming all grammatical structures to the learners.

Interaction is an aspect of English language Learning that has attracted huge attention. The understanding of interaction, as a mechanism for the acquisition of second language is what this study pursues. Generally, there are three major types of interactions taking place in an ELT classroom.

1. Interaction of the students with the teacher and vice versa.
2. Pair Interaction (Interaction with students' peers sitting together or next to them), and
3. Group Interactions.

These interactions make the students work in pairs and small groups, and involve them in using different modes of communication such as discussions, making presentations, brainstorming, group activity etc. It also encourages in-depth conversations among students.

The Interaction theory proposes that language acquisition is strongly facilitated by the use of the target language in interaction. Similarly to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, the Interaction Hypothesis claims that comprehensible input is important for language learning. In addition, it claims that the effectiveness of comprehensible input is greatly increased when learners have to negotiate for meaning.

Interactions often result in learners receiving positive or negative evidence. That is, if learners say something that their interlocutors do not understand, after negotiation the interlocutors may model the correct or incorrect language form. In doing this, learners can receive feedback on their production and on grammar that they have not yet mastered. The process of interaction may also result in learners receiving more input from their interlocutors than they would otherwise. Furthermore, if learners stop to clarify things that they do not understand, they may have more time to process the input they receive. This can lead to better understanding and possibly the acquisition of new language forms. Finally, interactions may serve as a way of focusing learners' attention on a difference between their knowledge of the target language and the reality of what they are hearing; it may also focus their attention on a part of the target language of which they are not yet aware.

As this immediate research is predicated on the impact of interaction in the English language Learning process, this will constitute a separate section to further analyze the nature of interaction in English language Learning.

3.0 Research Methodology

The research method adopted for this study is a directly qualitative research procedure. The adoption of the qualitative approach is aimed at submitting textual analysis and thematic discussion of how interaction enhances the learning of English as a second language. The approach facilitates the collation of different submissions and discussions on the intended theories of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. The data was collated through secondary sources, such as the high-ranking journal publications on the impact of interaction in the acquisition of English as a second language. The analysis is conducted descriptively, focusing on the tenets of the interaction, the impact of interaction, and the manner in which interaction in the classroom has improved the learning of English as a second language.

4.0 Discussions

The discussion of interaction is a vital component of the learning of English as a second language here focuses on what previous studies have unveiled and projects an overview to generate some basic findings. The impact of social interaction in general and classroom interaction in particular in the learning of a second language has been argued to be significant. This section discusses interaction as a facilitator of English language Learning in a classroom.

Current theories of ELT pertaining to second language acquisition, such as “Interactions Hypothesis” and “Communicative Language Teaching Approach” etc, have claimed that interactions have important effects on language acquiring and communicative competence. Interactions in language classrooms are important as it is a social activity for students by which they not only construct knowledge, but also build confidence and identity as competent language users (Luk & Lin, 2007). In an in-depth ethnographic study of teacher-student interactions in Hong Kong, Luk and Lin (2007) found out that students develop multiple identities through their classroom interactions with their language teachers. Although the study took place in an ESL classroom where native English language teachers are available, Luk and Lin (2007:188) present a telling story about how students negotiate identity and cultural resources, which are “translated into non-institutionally sanctioned language practices and identities”. Perhaps, the social knowledge students bring into the classrooms might be those “non-institutional language practices”, that schools and teachers are supposed to build on in order to enhance their learning.

Under this perspective, the social and the individual factors are comparable in terms of relevance because language is an integration of both components. Specifically, it is argued that “people gain control of and reorganize their cognitive processes during mediation as knowledge is internalized during social activity” (Lightbown & Spada,

2006, p. 47). This statement strongly emphasizes the importance of interaction and the mental processes involved during the interaction with another interlocutor. The main tenet of this theory is that the human mind is mediated; this essentially means that the human mind employs language, which is a symbolic artifact, in order to regulate, or mediate people's relationships with themselves and the world around them (Lantolf, 2001). On that regard, language serves as the mediator between the world and the mind, reshaping biological perception into cultural perceptions and concepts. When language becomes social, patterns are changed in order to mediate mental activity. Language does not have to be completely syntactic in its form, because the context given by the topic supports the learning process.

All these activities are important in English language learning because they are essential mental capacities that will lead to the successful acquisition of an L2. Taking into account the idea that, under the Socio-cultural perspective, learning is both a cognitive and a social process, it is worth mentioning the relationship between thinking and Lantolf (2001) points out that despite the fact that these concepts are neither a single unit nor completely independent, they are closely related: speaking is the public realization of what once was a private thought. Therefore, these two aspects are necessary for a complete understanding of human mental capacities, and as a consequence, the learning process itself.

According to the socio-cultural perspective, it is essential for learners to interact with other individuals in order to develop L2 acquisition. In this model, learning occurs when a learner interacts with an interlocutor. Thus, this is a situation in which a learner is able to perform at a higher level of proficiency because there is support from the interlocutor. Teachers have bear in mind that teaching must be in accordance with the roles of language teaching for the person or society. Also, the acquisition process may be materialized through talking, or in other words, learning by talking. In such a way, learners would be able to co-construct knowledge in collaboration with an interlocutor (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Collaborative dialogues, then, explain how language learning takes place through interaction among the participants of the social activity. Along the same lines, the following techniques and approaches have a strong interactionist load in their features, and they are heavily related to communication in the classroom and Constructivism. Starting with the Whole Language Approach, which states that language should not be taught as a set of separate components of language, such as grammar and vocabulary, but rather as a whole (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In this sense, it is closely related to the Socio-cultural tradition because it has a holistic and more natural perspective to the ESL teaching. According to the authors, this essentially means that the Whole Language Approach emphasizes the teaching of literacy through real communication, and it is

designed to help learners of all ages to acquire an L2 in the same manner that native speakers learn their L1.

Beyond the above description, there are other methods that are relevant in the discussion of interaction as a means of improving in the knowledge of English as a second language. One of such is the Competency Based Language Teaching (CBLT). This method, which was introduced mainly to handle the learning of English as a second language by the immigrants in some nations, has proven to remain effective in the discussion of interaction as an impactful tool in the learning of English as a second language. Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) is mainly based on the principles of Competency-Based Education (CBE), which are focused on the outcomes of learning in language programs. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), this refers to the description of specific types of knowledge and skills that learners should acquire at the end of a language course. The authors point out that competency lists have been determined through the analysis of typical tasks required in life-role situations, such those needed by immigrants who have to learn an L2. Therefore, the CBLT is the application of teaching with an emphasis on output: that is, it is focused on a set of certain knowledge that learners should master in order to function proficiently, which are achieved through interaction. Similarly, Content-Based Instruction is an approach that bases teaching around the information that the student will acquire rather than linguistic knowledge. It establishes that people learn a language more successfully when they use the language as a means of acquiring information, rather than as a target itself (Richard & Rodgers, 2001). Lastly, Community Language Learning (CLL) is a method that applies the idea of counseling to the teaching of languages. Following Richards and Rodgers (2001), this means that a person gives support and assistance to a learner who needs help. In this manner, this metaphor redefines the roles of teacher and learners in the classroom, and at the same time, it emphasizes the importance of interaction.

Additionally, there are several requirements for teachers as well: they must be highly proficient in both their L1 and L2, they should avoid using traditional materials, and they have to be quite sympathetic in their role as counselors. Likewise, Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) is part of a bigger instructional approach that is called Collaborative Learning (CL). According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), this is an approach that promotes the use of cooperative activities in the classroom, such as those involving pairs or small groups of learners. In this manner, the CLL encourages interaction between peers, and it is viewed as a learner-centered approach. Some of its main goals include: offering instances for naturalistic language learning, developing successful and meaningful learning, and finally, increasing learner motivation, among others.

Across studies of interaction as a socio-psychological factor that impacts the learning of English as a second language, different researchers have proposed varying but structurally related perspectives. These are approaches that aid the interpretation of the place of interaction in English language Learning. After the studies carried out by Long, who is the main progenitor of interactionism in English language Learning, other researchers have applied related perception to further unveil the relevance of interaction in English language Learning.

One of such projection is that socio-cultural perspective of interactionism in English language Learning, which is usually associated with Vygotsky's work (1978). The perspective emphasizes the role of thinking and speaking in the context of the activity. According to this perspective, an individual's mental activity can be understood only by investigating it within its cultural, historical and institutional context. Central to the socio-cultural perspective is the fact that any mental activity is investigated as an interaction between social agents and the physical environment, so the theory has a significant emphasis on the role of action in cultural context.

Similarly, Walsh (2006) confirms that social interaction and context are not separated from the learning situation. The role of culturally developed sign systems, such as language, is stressed in social interaction since they are regarded as tools for thinking and the construction of socially shared meanings. The individual learns to understand the world and self through sign systems, which are seen as having personal, social and cultural importance. This supports Vygotsky's view of the role of active participation and assistance provided by other members of the learning community. Applying the pedagogical practices and instructional settings to the socio-cultural theory, emphasis is often placed on providing learners with the opportunity to engage in their zones of proximal development supported by social interaction with more knowledgeable members of the culture (Kumpulainen & Wary 2002).

There is also the cognitive perspective which has been associated with Piaget's developmental theory and cognitive psychology in general. The cognitive perspective on learning emphasizes the individual's mental activity, the development of thinking, cognitive strategies, and their application. The cognitive perspective sees interaction in English language Learning as supporting the individual's knowledge construction, since it helps to activate the existing knowledge of individuals. Social interaction is seen as helping the individual to understand and become aware of thinking processes since the organization of thought in speech assists the reorganization of knowledge. Doise and Mugny (1984) state that the disagreements confronted during the interaction may cause cognitive conflicts, which, after being solved, stimulate cognitive accommodation in the individual. The cognitive theory emphasizes psychologically equal interaction, in which individuals coordinate their actions towards a common goal. Psychologically equal interaction between individuals is

seen as enabling the creation of conflict situations relevant for the construction of knowledge (DeVries 1997).

These two perspectives have extensively dominated the discussion of interaction in the classroom. For emphasis, Vygotsky perspective on interaction in English language Learning supports the belief that “intellectual development can be understood only in terms of cultural and historical contexts children experience” (Slavin 2006, p. 42). Whilst the advocates of a cognitive theory analyze cognition and thinking as conceptual processes that are located in the individual, socio-cultural researchers, on the other hand, take social action as the unit of analysis (Cobb 1994). Crucial to the latter view are the means whereby participation in interaction is associated with the individual's development. It is noteworthy, the cognitive theory conceptualizes thinking as an activity in the individual's mind, whereas the socio-cultural perspective does not separate thinking from its social context, but rather examines it as a social action.

This shift in the theoretical concepts of learning can positively affect the nature of social factor in classroom and emphasize the importance of dynamic teaching and learning. There is an emphasis on the role of student as an active participant and classroom interaction may be seen nowadays as an element to the success of L2 teaching and learning. Accordingly, this comparison shows us that the cognitive perspective has come closer to the socio-cultural view of learning. However, there are still distinct differences between the two perspectives.

Based on the fact that data was collated through different secondary sources, there are arrays of citations in the discussion mainly to ensure that all the expressions culled from secondary sources are dully referenced.

4.1 Summary of Findings

The discussion as presented provided an understanding of the premises of interaction and its relevance in the learning of English as a second language. The following findings are cardinal in the discussion:

1. The impact of interaction in the learning of English as a second language is better examined in the light of the essence of communication in second language learning.
2. Learning English as a second language in the classroom seems to be effectively dependent on the interaction between students and teachers, and students with other students.

3. The discussion also unveiled that different theories and methods have been developed in the account of the impact of interaction in the learning of English as a second language in the classroom.
4. The understanding of the relevance of interaction in the learning of English as a second language promulgates the functionality of both the cognitive and socio-cultural developmental systems of the learner and the teacher. This is discussed in light of the structure and nature of the classroom.

The interaction between teachers and students has a great impact on the process of acquiring English as a second language. However, part of the discussion is to unveil the cognitive and socio-cultural implications of interaction components. When students interact in English as their second language, there is the tendency to transfer certain socio-cultural which may impact on the interaction process. As such, interaction in the classroom is usually monitored, especially when this is in the period of teaching.

There is the angle of lack of interaction. Lack of interaction between teachers and students, and students with fellow students inside language classrooms usually amount in poor learning. Lack of interaction is a reason for slow communicative competence of English in ELT classes. The effectiveness of interaction is often governed by teachers' and learners' intentions, actions, attitudes, and motivations. The analysis also unveiled that there are so many techniques employed to enhance communicative competence in language classrooms. This has the implication that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Collaborative learning, role-plays, interviews, games, pair-work, surveys, etc are the techniques used to enhance interactions.

5.0 Summary and Conclusions

From the study carried out in this research, the interaction was proven to remain a basic technique frequently implemented to enhance learning in the English language teaching (ELT) classroom. The study also established that interaction helps to figure out the real challenges of the students in acquiring a second language, mainly in the classroom. Consistent interaction, which directly engages the students in the learning process, was proven to trigger teachers to expedite suitable methods to inculcate behavioral changes among learners.

It is thus concluded that the impact of interaction in the learning of English as a second language is enormous. Teachers of English as a second language must implement different interaction mechanisms and principles, and provide an impact record of the

systems in order to further the projection of discussion, communication, and interaction inside the classroom.

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