



Improving Via Mutual Understanding: The Application of Interaction in the ESL/EFL Classrooms

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Abstract: Interaction is one of the crucial parts in the field of second language acquisition. From being initially neglected to becoming the central attention of research, interaction among students has gained increasingly focus recently. This article provides some viewpoints from the previous studies and introduces some relevant perspectives on why interaction is important to facilitate ESL/EFL learners' learning outcomes. Also, this article analyses some research to figure out how to meaningfully deploy interactive activities in the language learning classrooms. A suggested activity is introduced in this article. However, the research on interaction still has a long way to go. This article mainly summarizes the outcomes of some former studies and provides a possible method to help fresh instructors to facilitate learners' peer-interaction during the class.

Keywords: Interaction; Negotiating for meaning; Motivation; ESL; EFL

1. Introduction

The research for second language learning exists for an extended period. In the 1980s, some researchers like Krashen [1] and Swain [2] focused on the teaching and language surroundings of second language acquisition. From another perspective, Michael Long draws out his interaction hypothesis and states that the interaction between speakers can benefit second language learning [3] [4] [5]. Based on the hypothesis, Gass and Mackey draw out the interaction approach and state that interaction can facilitate learners' second language acquisition by providing feedback and extra chances to produce their language. [6] This article will focus on the interaction and its strategies. Using some former relevant studies in this area, this article aims to explore the factors that can affect interaction and how to use it in the second language classroom. First, the explanation of some relevant theories will be presented, followed by some former research related to the impacts of interaction. Afterwards, the application of interaction in the classroom will be discussed.

2. Theories related to interaction approach

In 1980s, Krashen draws out his famous input hypothesis. He summarizes his research and states that the comprehensible input is crucial for second language acquisition. Sharing an agreement with the comprehensible input, Michael Long focuses on the different directions with Krashen and draws out his interaction hypothesis. He concentrates on how to make input comprehensible and states that input and interaction, which been modified for non-native speakers, can be helpful to their understanding.

Later, trying to solve some issues raised by other researchers (e.g., Smith [7]) and complete this hypothesis, Long has modified his initial version of hypothesis and pointed out the importance of noticing and feedback. He states that learners' language modified for meaning negotiation and the feedback they receive in the interaction process can help learners notice the particular language patterns and the competence gap in their knowledge, thus, easy for learners to make progress. In other words, the meaning negotiation and feedback in the interaction process can help learners get the awareness of the knowledge they may lack currently and provide a direction for their learning in the next stage.

In the twenty-first century, with the research on the interaction has become more and more comprehensive and some parts of this hypothesis have been proven, some researchers like Myles have started viewing it as a theory. [8] Gass and Mackey has studied on the interaction in second language acquisition and named some relevant ideas as interaction approach, which also include Krashen's input hypothesis, Swain's output hypothesis. Earlier, in the 2006, they create a model of interaction and learning and states that interaction contains negotiation, recast, and feedback, and all of them interact with each other in the interaction hypothesis and help learners notice the knowledge gap, thus, facilitate their learning. [9] In their 2020 research, they then state that the core principle of interaction approach is that interaction can benefit learners' second language improvement via giving feedback to their language output and providing more chances to communicate.

The research of interaction or interactionist perspective is crucial to the research of language learning. Unlike innatists, the research on interaction tries to focus the attention on learners' development progress rather the language and learners' aptitudes, which provides a new path of exploring language learning. [10] Nowadays, there is no suspicion about the benefit of interaction in language learning, many researchers have move forwards and study the factors that can impact the classroom interaction and its strategies. Zuniga and Simard compared some previous research and summarised that some factors like the role of students and teachers and the goal of an activity can all affect interaction activities in the classroom. [11] In the next part, some relevant studies will be discussed.

3. Former empirical research on interaction

3.1 Study 1: Investigating negotiation of meaning in EFL children with very low levels of proficiency

Students' age and language competence can always be concerned about the effectiveness of the interaction activity in the language classroom. On the one hand, young learners may lack of the necessary language ability for interaction; on the other hand, they may be unable to use some strategies during communication. Trying to explore these factors that can impact the interaction in the classroom, Lázaro and Azpilicueta deploy a study focused on the peer interaction among 16 young Spanish English speakers who have learnt English for one or two years (aged from seven to eight). They arrange guessing games for young learners in pairs and observe their interaction during the process. Learners' English competence can be viewed as beginner according to the result of language test in their school.

The result of the study shows that young learners' negotiation is less than other age groups comparing with previous studies, but they can use some strategies to communicate with each other. Besides, learners in the study shows effective feedback on wh-form like when/where since they have learnt such grammar patterns before. Thus, Lázaro and Azpilicueta state that young learners can finish some tasks via interaction by using communication strategies despite lacking some language knowledge, which may help them improve on language learning. [12]

3.2 Study 2: The influence of creative task engagement on English L2 learners' negotiation of meaning in oral communication tasks

Besides the learners' age, the task deployed in the classroom can also affect the interaction process. Wang's research tries to understand how the types of the task can influence the occurrence of meaning negotiation and the types of interaction strategies among peers. The participants in this study are all university students in Taiwan who majors English, and their language competences are high. The researcher analysis the participants' interactions during the learning process. In this study, Wang prepares two types of activities: creative activity and controlled activity, and each classification contains two tasks, decision-making and opinion exchange. Both tasks have their own topics, respectively, while creative groups have less restrictions than two controlled activity groups.

After analysis the data from all the four groups, Wang found that negotiation happens more in creative activities and interaction occurs more in decision-making activities. According to the results, Wang concludes that creative activities can motivate learners' interaction. In other words, since there is less information in creative activities, and it may require learners to communicate more to finish the task. Besides, decision-making activities can motivate the interaction among students. [13]

3.3 Study 3: Interaction mindsets, interactional behaviors, and L2 development: An affective-social-cognitive model

The studies mentioned above are all about the objective factors, the subjective factors of learners themselves can also affect the interaction process. Sato has studied on how learners' own thoughts can impact interaction and second language learning. Participants of this study are ten EFL students aged from fifteen to sixteen in a Chilean middle school. Five of them are from class A with better English competence and more positive attitudes towards English compared with the other five students from class B. Trying to explore the relationship about learners' mind, Sato gathered and analysed three types of data: pre-activity interview of participants' mindsets, interaction data, and post-activity assessment scores. The topic of the study is about simple past tense, and before the participants interacting with each other, they are asked to watch a movie and finish some gap-filling tasks. Then, they are asked to have a role play of the movie and discuss the connection of the movie and reality.

This study shows that students who shows willingness of interaction before the project can interact with others in an effectively, for instance, provide more corrective feedback and frequently exchange their ideas with others. Besides, those students perform better in the grammar test after the project. Thus, Sato concludes that learners with more positive mindsets

towards interaction can make interaction process more effective. [14]

4. Proposed application for teaching

These three meaningful studies, which have been discussed above, focus on different perspectives of interaction, which can provide some useful suggestions for classroom application.

Study one shows the possibility of deploying interaction activities for young or low-level language learners. According to Lázaro & Azpilicueta's study, even some children with relatively low level of English can use various communication strategies to maintain the communication and finish the task via interaction, thus, may facilitate their language ability. Besides, the research also shows that children still show some difficulties in interaction are due to the lack of language knowledge. However, children show effectiveness in corrective feedback about the knowledge they have learnt before, like wh-form. In other words, age cannot be a restriction in deploying interactional activities in language classroom. Instead, teacher can help young learners interact effectively before the interaction.

The second study mainly focuses on the impacts of task type. Azkarai and Imaz Agirre's research has proved that one-way and two-way tasks can also show differences in learners' negotiation strategies during the interaction. [15] As for creative and controlled activities, Wang states that meaning negotiation occurs more in the creative activities than controlled ones. That means different tasks can affect learners' interaction, further, influence their language improvement. However, Wang mentions that more interaction in creative activities does not mean creative activities are better than controlled activities. Thus, teachers have to consider the features and purposes of each activity in teaching and make them effective.

The third study is about students' mindset about interaction. Due to students' character differences and their views towards interaction, some students may refuse to share their ideas and feedback with their peers. Sato provides some counterexamples of students' interaction during the lesson, like the suspicious mind of their peers' language level and the outcomes of interaction, and all of them lead to unsuccessful outcomes. He then states that teachers have to realise that they can do much more than provide a chance for students to communicate. That is, teachers have to create an interaction-friendly context before the activities, consider the characteristics of some students and help them be willing to participate. It is not only for themselves, but also for the effective learning of their peers.

5. Suggested interactive activity in the ESL/EFL classroom

Summarizing these three studies, I would like to provide an interaction activity in second language classroom.

5.1 Activity

The content of the lesson is the simple past tense. Students are ten lower-intermediate English speakers aged from ten to eleven in a language institution. This activity is an information-gap deployed in the production stage in P-P-P approach. This activity aims to provide an opportunity for students to communicate with their peers using the simple past tense and fill the gaps (see Figure 1 for student A and 2 for student B). Here are the stages. After the activity, students will be asked to finish a chart which includes some questions and solutions they are facing during the interaction (see Figure 3).

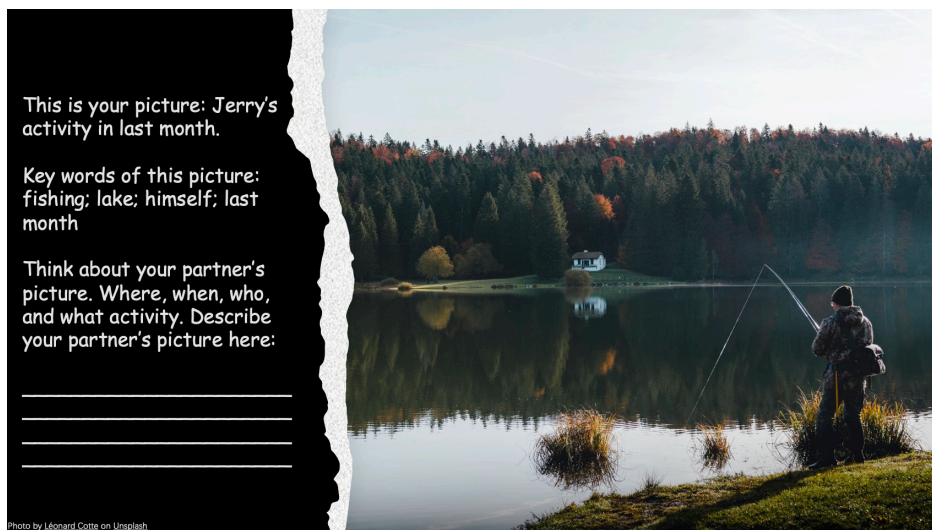


Figure 1. Handout for student A

1 Stage one: Review the key knowledge in this lesson.

1 Stage two: Tell the rules of the activity. Motivate students' interaction minds by providing rewards.

1 Stage three: Students communicate with each other and try to fill the information gap. Teacher has to walk around in the classroom and provides help.

1 Stage four: Choose some students to describe the picture and show the answers.

1 Stage five: Ask students to list questions during their interaction and solve them.



Figure 2. Handout for student B

Self-monitor table

Type	Issues	Solution	Clear or not
Teacher's instruction	1.	1.	
	2.	2.	
	3.	3.	
Issues from peers	1.	1.	
	2.	2.	
	3.	3.	
Your issues	1.	1.	
	2.	2.	
	3.	3.	

Figure 3. Self-monitor Table

5.2 Evaluation of this activity

5.2.1 The benefits of this activity

As for the benefits of students, first, the review of what learners have learnt in this lesson can benefit interaction outcomes. As Lázaro and Azpilicueta's idea, language knowledge may lead to unsuccessful interaction since learners cannot distinguish right from wrong. By reviewing the knowledge, learners can better understand what they have learnt and provide better feedback to their peers during the interaction.

Second, this activity is appropriate for learners to communicate with their peers. The aim of this activity is to let students interact with others using the knowledge they have learned. Information-gap aims to cultivate learners' interaction strategies and correct their language production via communication. [16] By talking with others, learners can practice their language knowledge and get feedback from others to make progress.

Besides, this activity also pay attention to the mindset of students. Before the activities, teachers use rewards to motivate students to participant into the activities. As Sato's suggestion, the attitude towards interaction can be shaped by the surroundings. Cooperative interaction can be induced when the outside environment is favourable. [17] From the perspective of motivation, according to Dörnyei's motivation framework, it can help learners to get initial motivation for the activity. [18] Thus, it can encourage them to positively participate in the interaction and get better outcomes.

Overall, according to Gass and Mackey, the interaction can help learners to modify their input considering others feedback and make progress on their language. This activity requires learners to communicate with each other to finish the task, which provides opportunities for learners to interact with each other.

5.2.2 Evaluation of the teaching practice

In this part, I would like to use two methods to evaluate the activity: the self-monitor table and post-interview.

The self-monitor table (see Figure 1) will be delivered before the lesson. During the lesson, students may have some questions about either the teacher talk or peers' response. As a result, students can take notes and try to solve these issues instead of neglecting them. However, after the lesson, students have to give the table back to teachers. There are two reasons. First, since students are work in pairs, the teacher cannot acquire all the information during the interaction activity, thus, has to evaluate the whole process after class. Second, it can be helpful for the teacher compares the performance of students during and after the class and provide them some help in the future learning. Overall, it can be useful for teacher evaluate the effectiveness of interaction and teaching outcomes

In relation to post-interview, the teacher can choose some students according to the chart they filled during the lesson and ask some questions to them. These questions can contain their emotion of the lesson or their learning outcomes of the interaction. Besides, the teacher can also ask some questions about the content of the lesson and evaluate the learning outcomes of the lesson. On the one hand, the teacher can figure out students' thought of interaction activities during the lesson; on the other hand, the questions about the content can explicitly show the status of knowledge acquirement. Furthermore, using interview instead of quiz can alleviate learners' negative affection, which can be helpful to know learners' authentic situation.

Overall, providing chart during the lesson and interview students after the class can provide a clear picture both on students' mind and their knowledge, which can help teachers modify their teaching process and facilitate learners' improvement.

6. Conclusion

This article is based on Gass and Mackey's theory about the benefits of interaction and Zuniga and Simard's theories about the influential factors of interaction. Then this article goes into depth on studies from Lázaro & Azpilicueta, Wang, and Sato to explore different factors that can impact interaction in the ESL/EFL classroom. Finally, an interactive activity that can be conducted during the class is introduced, followed by an evaluation of this activity.

However, this article only provides possible solutions and suggestions of some questions related to using interaction to facilitate learners' learning outcomes. Moreover, the study on understanding how interaction can affect learners' knowledge acquirement still has a long way to go, especially in the context of the burgeoning of artificial intelligence.

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