Positive and Negative Effects of Interaction in the Classroom on Second Language Acquisition: A review of the literature

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Introduction

Children successfully acquire their first language in a certain period of time by a process of imitation and reinforcement in natural surroundings as they are growing up. On the other hand, the majority of adults (and some younger children) fail to achieve native-like fluency in subsequent language acquisition, regardless of the amount of tuition or exposure they have to that language. Hence, linguists have investigated first and second language acquisition, the reasons why there is this difference in L1 and L2 acquisition, what interaction can aid the acquisition process, and how interaction, positively or negatively, affects the acquisition process. In the 1950's and 1960's, research began with investigations into how L1 interferes with L2 acquisition: *Contrastive Analysis*. In the past thirty years, new approaches to teaching have been researched alongside new theories of acquisition, such as, Krashen's Monitor Model and The Natural Approach. The communicative approach to teaching is the most popular approach at the moment. Since this approach emphasises communication, it is not surprising that extensive research has been carried out on how interaction in the classroom affects acquisition and increases communicative competence and on what classroom interaction is best to achieve acquisition.

This paper will offer an overview of first and second language acquisition. Then, three theories of second language acquisition will be discussed. The second part of the paper focuses on different types of interaction and how they positively or negatively affect second language acquisition.

1. First Language Acquisition (FLA)

The question of why L1 develops in a particular way is explained by two theories: the *nativist* approach and the *interactionist* approach. The *nativist*

approach:

> argues that children are born with a language faculty which is already equipped with considerable knowledge about the form that human language takes, and have only to be exposed to particular human languages for their mental grammars to be fixed in appropriate ways (Johnson & Johnson, 1998, p.129).

This approach is linked with Chomsky's (1975) 'Language Acquisition Device' (LAD). Chomsky claimed that humans have a LAD, which is used for acquiring their first language and this LAD explains why children acquire language in a short time without need of instruction. The *nativist* approach is also linked with the notion of universal grammar. Chomsky claimed that all adults regardless of their mother tongue have knowledge of grammar and this knowledge is then, sometimes selectively, used when acquiring a language. The *interactionist* approach argues that "language development is parasitic on more general human cognitive capacities for memorising, learning and generalising" (p.129).

Johnson and Johnson (1998) also highlight five general characteristics of L1 acquisition. The first characteristic is that acquisition for L1 is rapid. Although vocabulary and some structures will not be acquired until later, most structures have been acquired by the age of five. Secondly, L1 acquisition is inevitable and successful. It may take a little longer for some children to make utterances or produce the correct phonological sounds, but because first language acquisition is not chosen, and is part of growing up, the acquisition is inevitable and successful. Thirdly, there are broad stages of development from the first babbles to the acquiring of lexical and functional words. The fourth characteristic is of grammatical knowledge, which is acquired in stages. "This kind of knowledge is not evident in any input children receive, nor is it ever taught to most native speakers, and yet they know it in some sense." (p.130). The last characteristic is that children acquiring their mother tongue do so, without correction, reward or feedback.

2. Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Second language acquisition shares some characteristics with first

language acquisition; development takes place in systematic stages, correction, reward and reinforcement do not affect the way L2 learners develop, and some sort of LAD is effective in L2 acquisition. However, second language acquisition is not inevitable and not always successful. Researchers that follow the notion that L1 and L2 acquisition are similar believe that some sort of language faculty, like the LAD mentioned in first language acquisition, is responsible for L2 acquisition. All language learners have the same language faculty in use, however motivational and/or attitudinal factors inhibit the language faculty's operation, thus making some learners unsuccessful in acquiring a language. Other researchers believe that first and second language acquisition are not connected. They believe that learners construct and test hypotheses based on the language that they hear. Learners are able to do so due to the general cognitive abilities that humans already have. This cognitive approach is still a relatively new field; thus more developments in this area are expected. The next part of the paper will look at some of the more salient theories behind second language acquisition.

Krashen's Monitor Model

Krashen's Monitor Model consists of five hypotheses: the acquisition/learning hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the affective filter hypothesis and the input hypothesis. Krashen claims that acquisition and learning are independent of each other, thus contributing to second language competence differently. He defines 'acquisition' as "a subconscious process identical in all important ways to the process children utilise in acquiring their first language" (Krashen, 1985, p.1) and 'learning' as a "conscious process that results in 'knowing about' language" (Krashen, 1985, p.1).

The hypothesis that has received the most acclaim and criticism is the input hypothesis. The input hypothesis argues that the learner needs 'comprehensible input' for the acquisition of a language. The main claim here is that,

We progress along the natural order by understanding input that contains structures at our next 'stage' — structures that are a bit beyond our current

level of competence. (Krashen, 1985, p.2)

Krashen uses the terminology, 'i + 1' where 'i' is our current level and '1' is the next stage. He also suggests that the learner need not be actively participating for comprehension to take place. For example, watching TV in the target language is comprehensible input. In addition, the formal instruction of grammar is not needed as long as there is a sufficient amount of input. This hypothesis has been criticised due to the lack of evidence, vague definitions of important terms (see Gregg, 1984 and McLaughlin, 1987 for a detailed discussion of Krashen's work), and because Krashen's hypothesis is considered too 'fundamental.' "There is more to teaching than 'comprehensible input' " (Ellis, 1990. p.107). However, most researchers agree that there is still a need for input, but what form the input should take is still under discussion.

The Interaction Hypothesis

This hypothesis, like the input hypothesis, emphasises the need for 'comprehensible input,' and in addition investigates how we acquire language and what methods of interaction are best for the acquisition process. Long (1983) argues that "acquisition is made possible and is primarily facilitated when interactional adjustments are present" (cited in Ellis, 1990, p.107). The interactional features: clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, and self-repetitions (repairing, preventive and repairing) indicate that there is 'negotiation of meaning' or 'modified interaction' taking place, which makes the input comprehensible, thus aiding acquisition. The hypothesis is based on research that shows that foreigner talk (discussed later) consists of interactional rather than input modifications and that interactional adjustments facilitate comprehension.

The Output Hypothesis

Swain (1985) proposed this hypothesis in addition to the input/interaction hypothesis. She professes that the learner needs to be able to use language in order to attain native-speaker levels of grammatical accuracy. Swain states three main advantages of output. Firstly, the output produced in negotiating meaning helps the learner develop grammatical knowledge. Secondly,

learner hypotheses can be tried and tested, and thirdly the production may help the learner move from "semantic to syntactic processing" (Ellis, 1990, p.117). This hypothesis states that the learner needs to be 'pushed' to produce in order to acquire the second language. If there is no pushing then learners can make themselves understood using other means rather than using grammatical competence. Various studies by Swain (1985) and Pica (1988) support this hypothesis. The situation in Japan also supports this hypothesis. The focus has been on reading and writing skills. The input has been comprehensible but the lack of pushed output and the culture of the classroom environment have notably limited English language acquisition.

3. Interaction in the Classroom

The communicative approach to teaching is presently the most prominent teaching method in EFL. And since input and interaction are considered to be "critical components in the acquisition process" (Pica and Doughty, 1985, p.116), there has been considerable research into how communicative teaching methods affect the acquisition of second languages. The optimal situation for SLA would be living in the target language country combined with some form of formal instruction. However, for those who are unable to live abroad, there are other ways to interact in the target language to aid the acquisition process. In the second part of this paper, four areas of such interaction: speech modification, group activities, task type, and feedback will be discussed. The first section will focus on how both the teacher's and the learner's speech is modified and how that modification aids acquisition. Secondly, research on how non-native speakers interact in groups and the language that is produced in those groups will be discussed. Thirdly, the type of task used in the classroom and how task types affect acquisition will be examined. Lastly, the role of feedback in second language acquisition will be discussed.

Speech Modification
Teacher Talk/Foreigner Talk

There are two terms that are used to describe how native speakers or teachers use the language in the classroom or outside of the classroom. Foreigner talk is the language used by a native speaker (NS) when

conversing with a non-native speaker (NNS). The characteristics of foreigner talk are "syntactic simplicity, a high frequency of questions, and a variety of interaction devices to maintain the conversation" (Porter, 1986, p.201). In comparison, teacher talk is the language used by the teacher while teaching. Chaudron (1988) summarises the modifications of language use in teacher talk as:

1. [The] rate of speech appears to be slower.
2. Pauses, which may be evidence of the speaker planning more, are possibly more frequent and longer.
3. Pronunciation tends to be exaggerated and simplified.
4. Vocabulary use is more basic.
5. [The] degree of subordination is lower.
6. More declaratives and statements are used than questions.
7. [The] teacher may self-repeat more frequently. (p.85)

Long & Sato (1983) also provide evidence that imperatives and statements are used more frequently than questions in the classroom. However, using clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, repetitions, and re-phrasings to help clarify both what the NS says and what the NNS is trying to say is imperative for the negotiation of meaning. This negotiation of the input ensures that what is being said is at the level of comprehensibility that learners can modify for their own understanding, and in addition it gives the learner the opportunity to speak. Research into the questioning techniques of teachers has focused on referential questions: questions that ask for information that is unknown to the teacher, and display questions: the purpose of which is to elicit language practice. Brock's research (cited in Nunan, 1989) found that "referential questions encourage the learner to give significantly longer and more syntactically complex responses" (Nunan, 1989, p.30) than display questions do. However, the research by Long and Sato (1983) concluded that there were more display questions in ESL instruction in informal NS-NNS conversations than in NS-NS informal conversations.

The main argument concerns whether foreigner/teacher talk is characteristic of 'real' speech. Lightbrown (1985, p.265) states, the

"classroom learners cannot learn the language of outside-the-classroom if they are not exposed to it," thus exposure to English outside of the classroom or the use of 'real' English in the classroom is called for. However, it should be noted that modifications in speech, although possibly unnatural, appear to help maintain communication with a NNS thus helping make the input comprehensible and helping the learner produce utterances. On the other hand, to achieve comprehension some teachers use "ambiguous over-simplification or confusing over-elaboration" (Ellis, 1990, p.104) which may deprive students of the crucial input needed for acquisition.

Student Talk

In the past a one-way flow of information whereby the teacher elicits answers from the learner and then evaluates the learner's output has signified classroom discourse. Long and Porter (1985) calculated that in a 50 minute EFL class of 30 students, students only get 30 seconds of speaking time per class with their teacher. However with the recent emphasis on communicative competence, teachers and researchers have realised the need for student-led discourse. Early research by Long, Adams, McLean and Castanos (1976), supported research by Porter (1986), and found that there was a greater quantity of speech produced among learner-led groups compared to teacher-fronted classes. However, the question of whether or not the produced speech was of a high enough standard was then raised. Varonis and Gass (1985) researched into the amount of modified interaction apparent in NS/NS, NS/NNS and NNS/NNS conversations. They concluded that NNS/NNS discourse provided learners with a 'non-threatening forum' (Varonis & Gass, 1985, p.87) to practice in and in addition the input received is made comprehensible by their own negotiation - an element that is claimed to help second language acquisition.

In addition, Porter (1986) researched into how learners interact with different interlocutors (learners of the same level, higher proficiency-level learners and native speakers). Porter found that although NS interaction is preferential in terms of grammatical input, learner interlocutors provide other interactional features such as a higher quality and quantity of production that may be vital to SLA. In addition, mixing students of

different proficiency for group formation is also beneficial, as not only does it follow in line with Krashen's 'i + 1' theory but also produces better quality output. Doughty and Pica (1986) research shows that "the most modification is obtained when (a) all members of groups/dyads are non-native speakers, (b) members of groups had varying proficiency levels, and (c) members of groups had different L1s" (p.321). Porter's (1986) research supports Swain's Output Hypothesis as "learners talked significantly more to other learners than to native speakers" (p.214). Although these results are interesting they seem to be contradicted by the experience of teaching in Japan, where many students appear very shy in front of their peers and are unable to use checks that modify interaction, because they do not want to lose face even in a relaxed classroom environment. In addition, mixing students proficiency levels, may be beneficial for the lower learner of the pairing, since they are getting 'i +1' input, but less beneficial for the higher level learner of the pairing who is surely only getting 'i − 1' input.

Group Activities

Group activities are seen to have a number of benefits:

> the potential of group work for increasing the quantity of language practice opportunities,... improving the quality of student talk,... individualising instruction,... creating a positive affective climate in the classroom and... increasing student motivation (Long & Porter, 1985, p.207).

As seen previously, teacher-fronted classes provide less opportunity for L2 learners to practice the target language. Therefore as input and interaction are considered necessary for L2 acquisition, the opportunities to practice should be optimised. The quality of speech produced in NNS groupings, although perhaps lacking in grammatical input from the teacher does allow students to produce cohesive and coherent language rather than isolated sentence structures that are apparent in teacher-fronted discourse and allows for face-to-face communication in a more relaxed setting. Group work also encourages students to work at their own pace in "a non-threatening forum" (Varonis & Gass, 1985) with help being individualised to the needs of the learners. In addition, the learner is fully involved in the

process of learning, negotiating their partners input and testing-out their own hypotheses.

Group work is seen to be preferred over teacher-fronted classes; however, Pica and Doughty (1985) add that "in the classroom, pair rather than group work on two-way tasks may ultimately be most conducive to negotiated modification of interaction, and hence to second language acquisition" (p.132). This is supported by Gaies (1983) who notes that triads (and even bigger groupings) may lead to one student dominating the conversation thus providing less opportunity to interact for less dominating members.

In contrast to the advantages, several disadvantages of group work exist. Bygate (1988, p.76) notes that "group work at least allows and at worst encourages fossilisation and the use of deviant L2 forms." However research by Pica and Doughty (1985, p.132) showed that "students' production appears to be equally ungrammatical - or grammatical - whether speaking in groups or in the presence of their teacher." With respect to fossilisation of the learners' language, as long as the class content is not stagnant, fossilisation should not occur. In addition, although group work may provide more negotiation of meaning, interaction with native speakers is still imperative for second language learners to learn the sociolinguistic rules which are only found in native speaker discourse. Without exposure to this type of discourse, L2 learners may lack the social understanding needed for discourse with a native speaker. Doughty and Pica (1986) conclude that even though research shows that group activities produce more target language and modified interaction, it is still up to the teacher to provide grammatical input and to arrange/monitor the group activities so that the optimal conditions for second language acquisition are met.

Task Type

Recent classroom activity has drawn away from the traditional teacher-fronted teaching methods and moved towards more student-based activities to encourage communication. Research by Pica (1987) comparing decision-making exercises with two-way information tasks, showed that there were not only more interactional features being used, but also there was more social interaction in two-way information tasks than in decision-making exercises. The decision-making task used, required the students "to reach a

158

consensus on a matter of social consequence" and the two-way information task asked students to "pool individual portions of information in order to reproduce a configuration of flowers" (Pica, 1987, p.13). In two-way information tasks, the learners are forced into making sure they understand each other's utterances in order to complete the task. If one participant is misunderstood then the task cannot be completed; in the same way, if one participant withdraws from the activity, then the task cannot be completed. These "materials which provide for a two-way information exchange promote optimal conditions for participants to adjust their input to each other's level of comprehension" (Pica and Doughty, 1985, p.117). Therefore, the necessary component for acquisition according to Krashen is being fulfilled, i.e. comprehensible input. Decision-making activities, on the other hand, do not depend on full group participation for completion of the task. Stronger, more confident members of the group monopolize the activity and reach conclusions without full consensus from the group. Pica (1987) suggests jigsaw type activities are the most successful in equalising social interaction. This type of activity requires students to piece together segments of information in order to complete the task, for example, mystery stories. As all segments are required for completion of the exercise, an equal amount of interaction is needed by each person.

Feedback

Behaviourists believe that error correction should be diligent, whereas advocates of the communicative approach believe that correction should only take place if non-correction of the error intervenes with communication. In contrast, Krashen in his Monitor Model believes that as with L1 acquisition, error correction is ineffective for L2 acquisition, and errors will eventually eradicate themselves naturally. Although, there is no consensus among theorists about the relationship between second language acquisition and error correction a lot of research has been done in the field. Chaudron (1988) provides a summary of this research into error correction, which includes if learner errors should be corrected, when learner errors should be corrected, which learner errors should be corrected, how learner errors should be corrected, and who should correct learner errors.

If the hypothesis-testing theory is believed then L2 learners need

correction in order to correctly test their hypotheses of language. In studies by Hendrickson (1978), Cathcart and Olsen (1976) and Chenoweth et al. (1983) (cited in Chaudron, 1988) ESL learners showed a preference towards error correction; however, whether this correction actually assists SLA is a difficult thing to measure. The issue of when to correct errors is also a grey area with studies by Chaudron (1986), Courchêne (1980), Nystrom (1983), Salica (1981), and Lucas (1975) (cited in Chaudron, 1988) showing varied results. In some cases, teachers only corrected an error if no correction of the error complicated communication, whereas others corrected errors when the class exercise was emphasising form, and still others corrected the errors that appeared most frequently. In addition, Nystrom (1983, p.186) summarised that "explicit, immediate intervention may be the most appropriate form of correction" for ESL adult learners. In response to the question of how to deal with learner errors, a range of possibilities is given, ranging from ignoring the error to correcting it immediately. Once again the research is inconclusive and further complicated by the definition of the term 'error'. According to Corder, 'errors' are due to lack of knowledge whereas 'mistakes' are the inability to put what is known into practice (Johnson & Johnson, 1998, p.115). Finally there is the issue of who should correct errors; should it be the teacher, other learners, or the person making the error? Although teacher correction is preferred because teachers can provide more correction in terms of lexical, pronunciation and sociolinguistic errors, peer-correction is also considered to be effective. Studies by Porter (1986) and Pica and Doughty (1985) support the use of peer-correction.

> The frequency of other-correction and completions by students is higher in group work than in lockstep teaching and is not significantly different with NS and NNS interlocutors in small-group work, being very low in both contexts. (Long & Porter, 1985, p.222)

Conclusion

Communicative language teaching practice "developed independently on the basis of discourse analysis, theories of communicative competence, and pedagogical experience, with little or no knowledge of or regard for the

current acquisition research" (Lightbrown, 1985a, p.181.) The change from the grammar-translation method to a communicative language teaching practice is due more to trial and error, what works best for which teacher and for which group of students in what surroundings than to linguistic theories. In fact, research has provided teachers with evidence that what they are doing is effective. In addition, it has given teachers the knowledge of what NOT to expect from students. This evidence has not only helped teachers' confidence but has allowed students to know that the process involved in acquiring a second language is not easy, entails making many mistakes and does not necessarily result in fluency.

Furthermore, it is important for teachers to utilise the research on second language acquisition to optimise interaction possibilities in the classroom and maximise the chance of second language acquisition. Teachers should be aware of the language they use in and out of the classroom. Modified speech to aid comprehension is acceptable, whereas over-simplification gives the learner a false idea of what 'real' English is. Teachers should try to maintain elements of 'real' speech in their classroom discourse and in doing so teachers should equip the learner with ways to manage the classroom language. Phrases like, 'I don't understand' 'What does _____ mean?' and 'How do you spell _____?' can be explicitly taught to learners to help them tell the teacher they do not comprehend. Balancing the time spent on group activities with teacher-fronted discourse will also ensure that enough correct grammatical input is received. In addition, two-way information tasks give learners the opportunity to practice the target language while teachers can monitor the activity, and give immediate feedback when necessary.

Research is still needed in a variety of areas including sociolinguistic variables, i.e. ethnicity, native language, status, age, topic of discourse, cultural inhibitions and how they affect the negotiation of meaning in NNS/NNS discourse. In the meantime, encouraging interaction in the form of communication with NS and NNS, listening to the target language in various mediums and encouraging the use of more authentic materials, both inside and outside of the classroom, will no doubt help students trying to acquire a second language.

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