

## A Critical Review of the Interactionist Approach to Second Language Acquisition

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### Abstract

The realm of language acquisition, either first or second language, has been under the influence of three major theories, namely Behaviorism, Innatism, and Interactionism. The key figures in these schools of thought are Skinner, Chomsky, and Vygotsky respectively. Each theory has contributed to the field by highlighting a specific aspect of the language acquisition process. Behaviorist theory has given the main role to the environment, introducing the concepts of imitation and habit-formation. On the other hand, the innatist theory has focused on the role of mind and cognitive processes in language learning. Taking advantage of both the behaviorist and innatist theories, in the 19th century, the interactionist approach emerged which concentrated on the role of social interaction in language learning. Based on this approach, learners should be exposed to comprehensible, negotiated, or modified input in their attempts to acquire a language. In the same line, the present article tries to provide a critical literature on the interactionist approach in second language learning. Therefore, this review first sheds light on the major theoretical points introduced by this theory; then it tries to discuss some of the main implications and applications of the social interactionist approach in the domain of second language learning.

Keywords: constructivism, interactionist approach, interaction hypothesis

### INTRODUCTION

Language is part of every human, and the ability to communicate effectively is the goal of all languages. In Second Language Acquisition (SLA), a person tries to learn and acquire a language in addition to his/her native language. So far, many studies have been conducted by different researchers all of which have tried to shed light on the process of learning a second language. As a result, many approaches, theories and models have emerged trying to describe the way SLA occurs. Taking a look at the early days of language teaching and learning in 15<sup>th</sup> century the behaviorist approach proposed by Skinner was dominant in the realm of SLA. In summary, this theory

emphasizing on the role of environment, imitation and reinforcement suggested that students learn language or are conditioned in a language as a result of stimulus-response situations. The main problem with this theory was the fact that it was impossible to learn all the sentences in a language through imitation. However, a contribution of this theory was the role given to the external factor of environment in the process of second language learning. In opposition to the behaviorist theory, the nativist theory, also known as rationalism or cognitive psychology, rooted in Chomsky's ideas came out to be noticed. It considered human mind and cognitive processes as the key in acquiring language. It was claimed that all humans have access to a language acquisition device (LAD), an innate system, used in acquiring knowledge of a language. Language was believed to be innate and part of our genetic endowment. The nativist theory stated that all languages possess commonalities which emphasize universal grammar. The overemphasis of this theory on cognitive abilities as well as on the syntax, or grammar, and its ignorance of all other aspects of a language specifically the ignorance of the role of the environment were among the main limitations of this theory. Finally, drawing on the advantages of the previous behaviorist and nativist theories, in nineteenth century, the social interactionist approach under the influence of the constructivist school of thought emerged which revealed new insights on the process of acquiring a second language. This theory as well as its applications and implications in learning a second language will be disused in detail through this paper.

#### CONSTRUCTIVIST SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

Constructivist school of thought has been considered as one of the main foundations influencing trends, fashions, approaches, as well as theories concerning SLA. The notions introduced within this school have had a great impact on the emergence of the interactionist approach of SLA. Constructivism associated with the names of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, emerged as a prevailing paradigm only in the last part of the twentieth century. According to Brown (2000) constructivists, like some cognitive psychologists, argue that all human beings construct their own version of reality, and therefore multiple contrasting ways of knowing and describing are all considered to be equally acceptable. Spivey (1997, p. 23, cited in Brown, 2000) describe this perspective as "an emphasis on active process of construction of meaning, attention to texts as a means of gaining insights into those processes, and an interest in the nature of knowledge and its variations, including the nature of knowledge associated with membership in a particular group" (p. 11).

Constructive scholarship can focus on "individuals engaged in social practices...on a collaborative group or on a global community" (Spivey, 1997, cited in Brown, 2000). As Brown (2000) maintains a constructivist perspective goes a little beyond the rationalist/innatist and the cognitive psychological perspective in its emphasis on the primacy of each individual's construction of reality. Piaget and Vygotsky, both commonly described as constructivists, differ in the extent to which each emphasizes social context. Piaget (1972, cited in Brown, 2000) stressed the importance of individual

cognitive development as a relatively solitary act. Biological timetables and stages of development were basic; social interaction was claimed only to trigger development at the right moment in time. On the other hand, Vygotsky (1978, cited in Brown, 2000) maintained that social interaction was fundamental in cognitive development and rejected the notion of predetermined stages. Hickmann (1986) concluded that in the cognitive perspective of Piaget, social interaction is given a secondary role, whereas in Vygotsky's perspective, social interaction is primary for development. Therefore, Vygotsky and Piaget differ in how they relate social interaction to language acquisition. For Piaget, language has propositional and context-independent properties and it is a tool for abstract reasoning. Context and social functions of language have been given a secondary role in acquisition. In the perspective of Piaget, different stages in the child development are hierarchically related to each other, so that moral reasoning presupposes role-taking skills which presupposes, in turn, logico-mathematical reasoning. In Vygotsky's perspective, context-dependent and social interaction is primary in language acquisition. He claims that meaning is socially constructed and emerges out of the learner interactions with his/her environment (Vygotsky 1978, cited in Kaufman 2004).

#### INTERACTIONIST APPROACH

Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991, p. 266) argue that the interactionist views are more powerful than other theories "because they invoke both innate and environmental factors to explain language learning". They are the first to view language not only as a matter of syntactic structures but also as a matter of discourse. Vygotsky, a psychologist responsible for the foundation of the social interactionist theory states that meaningful interaction with others is the basis of new knowledge acquisition (Vygotsky, 1987). According to Brown (2000), Vygotsky proposed the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where learners construct the new language through socially mediated interaction. Learning must take into account the socio-cultural features and daily life experiences of a person. In a social interactionist view, knowledge develops first through social interaction and then becomes an internalized part of the cognitive structure of the learner.

To date, the role of social interaction in L2 acquisition has received very different interpretations in research, ranging from what can be considered a strong to a weak conception of this role. According to Mondada and Doehli (2004) the weak version of the interactionist approach acknowledges that interaction is beneficial (or even necessary; e.g., Gass & Varonis, 1985) for learning by providing occasions for learners to be exposed to comprehensible, negotiated, or modified input (e.g., Long, 1983, 1996). This framework basically assumes that social interaction plays an auxiliary role, providing momentary frames within which learning processes are supposed to take place. Contrary to this position, the strong version of the interactionist approach recognizes interaction as a fundamentally constitutive dimension of learners' everyday lives. That is, interaction is the most basic site of experience, and hence functions as the

most basic site of organized activity where learning can take place. In this view, social interaction provides not just an interactional frame within which developmental processes can take place; as a social practice, it involves the learner as a co-creator of joint activities, where linguistic and other competencies are put to work within a constant process of adjustment vis-à-vis other social agents and in the emerging context. This position is typically adopted by conversationalist or sociocultural approaches to L2 acquisition (Mondada & Doehler, 2004, p. 502).

The Social Interactionist theory does not neglect the previous theories, but gives an additional social perspective of language acquisition. According to Gass (1997) the interactionist approach has paid particular attention to the nature of the interactions L2 learners typically engage in. It has focused on investigating, for example, the role of negotiation for meaning in the context of NS-NNS (Native Speaker - Non-Native Speaker) conversations. Long's (1985) idea that comprehensible input is necessary for second language acquisition forms a basic tenet of the interactionist position. However, interactionists view the communicative give and take of natural conversations between native and non-native speakers as the crucial element of the language acquisition process. Their focus is on the ways in which native speakers modify their speech to try to make themselves understood by English-learning conversational partners. Interactionists are also interested in how non-native speakers use their (budding) knowledge of the new language to get their ideas across and to achieve their communicative goals. This trial-and-error process of give-and-take in communication as people try to understand and be understood is referred to as the negotiation of meaning. As Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) maintain, in the interactionist approach, the role of feedback given to learners when they make mistakes has also been the object of attention. Lyster and Ranta (1997) found that the most common feedback given to learners when they produce incorrect forms are recasts, i.e. a repetition of the learner's utterance minus the error; however, they also found that recasts were the kind of negative feedback learners were most likely to ignore.

According to Swain (1985) in addition to the importance placed on social interaction, some researchers have looked more closely at output, or the speech produced by English language learners, as an important variable in the overall language acquisition process. Language learner's output can serve to elicit modification of input from conversational partners to make it more comprehensible.

The most obvious manifestation of the interactionist approach is Long's interaction hypothesis which is discussed in detail below.

## INTERACTION HYPOTHESIS

The interaction hypothesis developed on the basis of the social constructivist and interactionist theories of language learning was introduced by Long in 1996. The word interaction, in this context, refers to the interaction between the language learner and

their teacher, other native speakers and nonnative speakers. Reynolds (2009) states that Long's interaction hypothesis compared to Krashen's notion of input is an interactionist theory by contending that input in general is made comprehensible through modified interaction, essentially, the negotiation of meaning that occurs between the language learner and their teacher or other native speaker or the interlocutors to arrive at the appropriate level of language input. Krashen (1987) said that there are three ways to obtain comprehensible input: context, simplified input and interaction. He hypothesized that language data which could be understood but with a slight effort, and which were slightly more advanced than the learner's level of understanding ( $i+1$ ), fostered learning. Although the importance of this concept of comprehensible input was considered paramount by many researchers, and became a dominant theme in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories, interactionist critics pointed to some of its insufficiencies. They doubted that mere exposure to input, even if comprehensible, could promote language learning. Long (1980, cited in Ellis 1999) agreed with Krashen that comprehensible input is necessary for acquisition, but he asserted the importance of "modified input". In Long's view, the comprehensible input, paramount in Krashen's Input Hypothesis, is the result of "modified interaction". Long (1985) maintains that it is becoming clearer that in order for learners to successfully construct their own learner-language, conversation and interaction in social contexts must play a central role in the acquisition process. Reynolds (2009) adds that, clearly, this mechanism is reminiscent of Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development. Moreover, the emphasis on learner language and interaction reflects social constructivist learning theory in general. According to Lightbown and Spada (1999, p. 43) the interaction hypothesis posits a three-step process: (a) Interactional modification makes input comprehensible; (b) Comprehensible input promotes acquisition; (c) Therefore, interactional modification promotes acquisition.

Lightbown and Spada (1999) continue to elaborate three types of modified interaction that facilitate the creation of comprehensible input: 1) comprehension checks—where the native speaker (NS) makes sure that the non-native speaker (NNS) understood, 2) clarification requests—where the NNS ask the NS to clarify, and 3) self-repetition or paraphrase— the native speaker or the non-native speaker repeat their sentences either partially or in their totality. In addition to this classification, Long (1983) considers some other conversational modifications including:

Here-and-now topics - topics limited to the immediate environment, or to experiences the native speaker imagines the non-native speaker has had.

NS: Did you prepare this by yourself?

Expansions - native speakers reacts to non-native speakers' errors by correcting and expanding what they have just said.

NNS: I have read it already yesterday

NS: Oh yeah, of course you read it yesterday

Topic-initiating moves - more abrupt and unintentional topic shifts are accepted when native speakers interact with non-native speakers. (It seems that this is due to the fact that even if interlocutors may want to understand each other, they do not always have the time or motivation to work toward this goal.

NNS: I arrived here first this morning

NS: Can you show me your work?

Shorter responses - high frequency of yes-no responses

Furthermore, Long (1983, p. 218-219) considers other linguistic adjustments typical of NS/NNS interactions including the following:

- Phonological: slower paced speech; more use of stress; pauses; more clearly enunciated; avoidance of contractions
- Morphology and Syntax: more well-formed utterances; shorter utterances; less complex utterances; few 'wh' questions
- Semantics: fewer idiomatic expressions, high average lexical frequency of nouns and verbs.

Long (1996, p. 415) claims that such modified input is evident in first language acquisition in the form of "motherese" and is realized in SLA by NSs using "simplified codes" such as foreigner talk, child language, pidgins, early second language (L2) forms, telegraphese, and so forth.

Long (1980) performed a discourse analysis of dialogue transcripts of dyads made up of native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS). Long found there was much more interaction between NS-NNS dyads than between NS-NS dyads, and concluded that increased interaction was due to misunderstandings between language partners and subsequent linguistic negotiations and modifications in order to resolve misunderstandings. Based on the findings, he extracted six generalizations:

First, linguistic simplification tends to increase comprehension; however, simple sentences alone are not always helpful and may even hinder.

Second, simplification and elaboration often co-occur, but simplification is not necessarily superior to elaboration.

Third, comprehension is consistently improved by interactional modifications and a combination of simplification and elaboration.

Fourth, modifications appear to be of more use to NNSs of lower L2 proficiency.

Fifth, isolated input or interactional adjustments are not sufficient for improving comprehensibility of whole texts.

Sixth, NNSs indicate a more favorable perception of their own comprehension when they have been exposed to modified speech. (p. 127)

Doughty and Long (2003) have cited, Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis as negotiation for meaning triggers interactional adjustments by the NS, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities and output in production ways. Interaction hypothesis emphasizes on the role of negotiated interaction in language development. According to Gass and Torres (2005) during negotiation works, the learner's attention is directed to:

- 1) The discrepancy between what s/he knows about L2 and what the L2 really is and
- 2) The areas of L2 which he doesn't have information. In this case, negotiation is the initial step to learning and it is one part of interaction.

Lightbown and Spada (2006) maintain that interaction hypothesis says that interaction is essential condition for SLA, through which speakers modify their speech and interaction patterns to help learners participate in a conversation. Ellis (1999) refers to interaction hypothesis as the conversational exchanges that arise when interlocutors seek to prevent a communicative breakdown or to remedy an actual communication stop that has arisen. He believes that acquisition is promoted when the input to which learners are exposed is made comprehensible through the interactional modifications that arise when meaning is negotiated.

#### THE ROLE OF INPUT IN CONSTRUCTIVIST/INTERACTIONIST APPROACH

Input is the most important element in SLA and without it one cannot acquire a second language. Ellis (1985, p. 127) defines input as "the language that is addressed to the L2 learner either by a native speaker or by another L2 learner and his interlocutors". All theories of second language learning have recognized the importance of input, but their interpretations of it vary. Ellis (1994) states that for behaviorists input consists of stimuli and feedback. Stimuli refer to models of a language and feedback refers to either positive reinforcement or correction. However, according to Brown (2000), nativists look at input as a trigger to our predisposed language capacity, arguing that everyone is equipped with a language acquisition device, which helps to acquire a second language. Krashen (1987) in his Input Hypothesis argues that learners have to have access to comprehensible input and the input should be slightly beyond their current competence.

Finally, constructivism as the school of thought underlying the interactionist approach, according to Brown (2000) emphasizes the importance of social context because human beings develop their linguistic competence in interaction with others. Piaget and Vygotsky, as two important constructivists, emphasize the importance of social contexts

in making the input comprehensible, but they have different views. As it was mentioned, Piaget (1972, cited in Brown, 2000) believes that human beings are equipped with language capacity, and social interaction is important to trigger our innateness. On the other hand, Vygotsky (1987, cited in Brown, 2000) rejects the notion of predisposition and claims that acquisition happens only through social interaction. To support Vygotsky' idea, Ellis (1997) states that children are able to acquire new knowledge which is slightly beyond their current competence as a result of the interaction with more competent interlocutors. Furthermore, having recognized the importance of social interaction, Roger, one of the constructivists, suggests that teachers should create a relaxed learning environment so that learners can free themselves to interact with others, and thus, maximize the effect of learning (Brown, 2000).

### THE ROLE OF INTERATION IN LEARNING

In language learning social interaction with peers is seen as an essential part of language and improves the cognitive development of those involved in this activity. In the area of language teaching, it is obvious that all the communicative approaches have paid a special attention to the role of interaction in classroom. The most widespread communicative approach namely task-based language teaching has been developed on the basis of this crucial concept. It is believed that through interaction, learners can enhance both their cognitive abilities as well as their productive skills in language. Within the domain of social interactionist approach different researchers have emphasized the role of interaction in language learning. Hatch (1978, p. 404) maintains that "one learns how to do conversation, one learns how to interact verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic structures are developed". Interaction helps learners to enhance their language proficiency as Vygotsky (1987, cited in Ormrod, 2003, p. 38) states "the range of tasks that children cannot yet perform independently but can perform with the help and guidance of others". According to Gass (1997, p. 104) "conversation is not just a medium of practice; it is also the means by which learning takes place". Furthermore, interactionists contend that face-to-face interactions plays a significant role in language learning because it provides learners with opportunities to orally produce language, engage in negotiation and to receive negative feedback (Ellis, 2003).

Ellis (1994) defines interaction as when the participants of equal status that share similar need, make an effort to understand each other. If role relationship is asymmetrical, meaning negotiation is inhibited. He says that some other factors that influence interaction, except status, are: the nature of the task, characteristics of participants and participant structure. Today, with the focus on "process" in the path of language acquisition, it is believed that language is emerged through interaction and negotiation for meaning.

## SOCIOCULTURAL THEORIES ON THE ROLR OF INTERACTION

One significant theoretical inspiration for the socio-interactionist view of learning is the sociocultural approach to cognition stressing the sociocultural dimension of activities and of cognitive development. This approach based on the work of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky, claims that cognitive development and learning originate in a social context (Vygotsky 1978, 1986). Socio-cultural approach has investigated the role of interaction in L2 acquisition and has emphasized how collaborative discourse construction lead to interaction. According to Mondada and Dohlier (2004) a central idea in the sociocultural approach is the Vygotskian (1978) notion of mediation, that is, higher forms of human mental functioning are mediated by tools (objects and symbolic means such as language) collaboratively constructed by members of a culture, and the development of these forms is rooted in socio-interactional practices within that culture. Cognition is thus understood to be situated in social interaction and in larger contexts: As Wertsch (1991, p. 6, cited in Mondada and Dohlier, 2004, p. 504) noted: "Human mental functioning is inherently situated in social interactional, cultural, institutional and historical contexts". Activities take a particular shape in particular social and institutional settings, a process that implies specific forms of conduct and socialization, and therefore specific forms of social acceptance, recognition, and valuing of displayed competencies. Learning a language is understood as being profoundly bound to social practices dependent on the learner's participation as a competent member in the language practices of a social group (cited in Mondada & Dohlier, 2004). Vygotsky (1978) believed that higher psychological functions, such as learning, develop in interaction between individuals. He hypothesized the existence of a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where functions learnt in a social dimension are transferred to a cognitive dimension. Socio-cultural perspective considers the role of multilingual society and argues that SLA should pay attention to the role of learners when they use language for different purposes and in different contexts. Lantolf (1996, cited in Ellis, 1999) argued that SLA in the view of interaction hypothesis is the process that occurs in the mind of learners rather than in people-embedded activity. He further asserts that interaction is a form of mediation through which learners construct new forms and functions collaboratively (Lantolf, 2000). Ellis (1999) says that the ethnographers believe that "interaction" is constructed by participants as they dynamically negotiate not just meaning, but also their role relationships and their cultural and social identities. Ellis (1999) claims that in spite of the fact that socio-cultural paradigm has a lot to offer how interaction leads to acquisition and constructs meaning, it has some weaknesses. One is that the followers of this theory have examined L2 use rather than L2 acquisition. There is no distinction between "use" and "acquisition" in socio-cultural perspective. Second is that there should be some formal criteria to determine what type of speech, private or social, learners are producing. Private speech is performed by learners under guidance, whereas social speech is performed without help. The third one is that this theory is carried out cross-sectionally, rather than longitudinally. By doing longitudinal

study, it may be found whether there are some cognitive changes on the part of the learners as the result of interaction.

## NEGOTIATION OF MEANING

In the process of conversation interlocutors are involved in interaction and in order for the interaction to proceed smoothly, interlocutors should comprehend each other and this not possible unless they engage themselves in negotiating meaning. One reason that interaction helps second language learning is that it allows learners to engage in negotiation of meaning. Long (1996) defined negotiation in this way:

The process in which, in an effort to communicate, learners and competent speakers provide and interpret signals of their own and their interlocutor's perceived comprehension, thus provoking adjustments to linguistic form, conversational structure, message content, or all three, until an acceptable level of understanding is achieved. (p. 418)

Negotiation of meaning fosters language acquisition because of the occurrence of interactional modifications.

According to Long (1996) negotiation for meaning, also called negotiation work causes native speaker or more competent interlocutor to make modifications in interactional exchanges. Negotiation for meaning makes language acquisition easier, since it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways.

Furthermore, negotiation of meaning is important for language acquisition, because according to Long (1996, p. 452) it involves "denser than usual frequencies of semantically contingent speech of various kinds" and the contingency is necessary for language acquisition because of the following reasons:

The frequencies of the target forms in the reformulations tend to be higher, as negotiation involves recycling related items while a problem is resolved, which should increase their saliency and the likelihood of their being noticed by the learner.

Many of the input modifications, such as stress of key words, partial repetitions, lexical switches and decomposition involved in some reformulations can also serve to make target forms salient independent of increased frequency in the input.

The reformulations also often involve rearrangements of adjacent utterances that both reveal how their constituents should be segmented, and weave rich semantic nets that illustrate the communicative value of target language forms. (p. 452)

It is concluded that it is the interactional adjustments that lead to comprehension and thereby making language acquisition occur. Swain (1985) refers to the advantages of

negotiation of meaning in terms of language acquisition and states that learners are forced to produce output. According to Swain (1985) learners need not only comprehensible input but also comprehensible output in order to achieve native-like proficiency. On the other hand, despite the benefits of the interaction in the process of language acquisition, some scholars question it. For instance, Ellis (2003) claims that frames such as confirmation checks or clarification requests may be used for a completely different function rather than being used for negotiation of meaning in conversation. For example, the person may simply repeat a word to show that he wants to continue the conversation. Furthermore, as Ellis (2003) contends whether or not comprehension is the result of negotiation of meaning is doubtful, because learners might comprehend input due to their schematic knowledge or contextual assistance. In addition, Krashen (1985) questioned the effect of internationally modified input on acquisition because he believes the effect of premodified input on acquisition is the same as the internationally modified input. Finally, Sato (1986, cited in Ellis, 2003) doubts the effect of interaction on language acquisition because in her 5-months study, two Vietnamese children did not succeed in acquiring English morphological markers of past tense in spite of frequent interaction with native speakers of English for 10 months.

#### FINAL REMARKS

So far many approaches and theories have been proposed looking at the process of SLA from different perspectives. Taking a look at the literature above, it seems that, the social interactionist approach to SLA provides the best environment needed to acquire a second language. In this environment, social interaction with teacher and specifically with peers is considered as the key and as an essential part of language which leads to cognitive development. As a pedagogical approach, taking the notions of the interactionist approach into account, it is clear that in the area of language teaching the task-based methodology known as TBLT can be effectively administered in the classroom. TBLT can be thought of as an appropriate teaching method that encourages the social interaction among the students in the classroom. This method encourages the scaffolding of tasks, the negotiation of meaning, the flexibility of group work, and student-centered atmosphere which are all met within the principles of interactionist approach. This fact draws the attention of the teachers and L2 instructors to choose and apply the principles of TBLT in their classrooms. One of the main problems of those teaching methods putting the teacher as the center of the class was the inability of the students in conversational and productive skills. However, interactionist approach, as the basis of TBLT can promote students to engage in productive activities both inside and outside the classroom. Also, teachers should try to provide circumstances that encourage oral discussions in their classes through which students can interact freely, express their ideas and take responsibility for their own learning. Whether by small groups or whole-class discussion, teachers can do much to create an interactive classroom. One important implication of interactionist perspectives is for material developers and textbook designers. They have to avoid the mechanical drills by

replacing them with meaningful activities, tasks; exercises as well as games all intended to encourage interaction and oral skills among the students in the classroom. Finally, teacher training courses would be beneficial in familiarizing teachers with the principles of collaborative learning and motivating them to opt for interactive practices in their classrooms.

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