

THE ROLE OF INTERACTION IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

РОЛЬ ОБЩЕНИЯ В УСВОЕНИИ ВТОРОГО ЯЗЫКА

Dr. Boyarkina Iren, PhD

Др. Бояркина Ирена

*University of Rome, Humanities Department, Rome, Italy
estel2@libero.it*

Римский университет, г. Рим, Италия

There are many approaches in the Second Language Acquisition studies, all of them have their strong and weak points. While the importance of input is accepted by virtually all theories in SLA studies, the role of interaction is not that unanimously defined. Interaction is one of the essential focuses in many approaches, though the view on it may vary significantly. For example, Stephen Krashen, the founder of the *Input Theory* virtually minimizes the role of interaction, postulating input as the necessary and sufficient condition for the second language acquisition, Lev Vygotsky in his *Sociocultural theory* of mind postulates interaction as the causative condition for SLA, as well as for other areas of learning. The theories of Vygotsky convincingly demonstrated the importance of interaction for the Second Language Acquisition and were widely used by many other scholars in the SLA studies. Vygotsky's views were elaborated by Michael Long and summarized in the *Interaction Theory*. The present paper analyses the role of interaction in SLA and focuses on *Interaction Theory*, the works of Michael Long, Teresa Pica and other researchers that studied the role of interaction in SLA.

Существует много подходов к изучению усвоения второго языка; все они имеют свои сильные и слабые стороны. Хотя важность входных данных признается практически всеми теориями, роль общения в них не так однозначно определена. Общение является одним из основных факторов во многих подходах, хотя взгляд на него может значительно различаться. Например, Стивен Крашен, основатель теории ввода, практически сводит к минимуму роль общения, определяя ввод как необходимое и достаточное условие для овладения языком. Лев Выготский постулирует общение как причинное условие для обучения. Теории Льва Выготского убедительно продемонстрировали важность общения для освоения второго языка и широко использовались многими другими учеными в исследованиях SLA. Взгляды Льва Выготского в последствии были разработаны Майклом Лонгом и легли в основу его теории взаимодействия. Данная статья анализирует роль общения для усвоения второго языка и фокусируется на теории взаимодействия, работах Майкла Лонга, Терезы Пика и других исследователей, которые изучали роль общения в изучении усвоения второго языка.

Key words: Lev Vygotsky, Stephen Krashen, Michael Long, Teresa Pica, second language acquisition, sociocultural theory, input hypothesis, interaction hypothesis, interaction, input, interactional modifications, feedback.

Ключевые слова: Лев Выготский, Стивен Крашен, Майкл Лонг, Тереза Пика, усвоение второго языка, социокультурная теория, гипотеза ввода, гипотеза взаимодействия, взаимодействие, ввод, интерактивные модификации, обратная связь.

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The importance of input in SLA is a concept shared by theorists that follow various linguistic approaches, but the real novelty of the sociocultural perspective is to consider interaction as the only means to provide the learners with the quantity and quality of input necessary to develop L2 proficiency. For the purposes of this research, let us define input and interaction as follows. Input is basically the language that the learner is exposed to, that is, the language he or she reads or listens to. It is important to distinguish the input from the language that the learner produces which is called output. Scholars also identify two kinds of input: *comprehensible* input, which is the language which meaning is understood, and *modified* input, which is the adjustment that makes the language more comprehensible for the learner. Interaction, on the other hand, means the conversation, but also any kind of linguistic relationship which exists between the participants; it can be interpersonal and intrapersonal.

Lev Vygotsky was the first scholar to express and analyze the sociocultural perspective of the SLA; he laid the foundations for the acknowledgement of interaction as an active and causative force in the acquisition process. He argued that interaction is a force which provokes the acquisition of the language, not a mere means which can facilitate the process, so he considered the social factors predominant, whereas the psychological stage of development appears later. The social nature of human beings, built on historically and culturally determined ways of operating information, becomes their psychological nature. Children are primarily social, even when they seem incapable to communicate verbally. They use gestures as a transitional way of communication but, as such, it is still communication and a form of interaction.

Vygotsky disagrees with Piaget who considers the cognitive development as something separated from the process of learning. In fact, speech is a social activity from the beginning. It is impossible to deny that children learn how to speak

from their parents and, simultaneously, they acquire a wide range of information: they learn how to behave imitating the adults. James Wertsch studying Vygotsky's perspective, pointed out three main themes in order to understand the kind of relation between individual and society and why this relationship is important to achieve acquisition.

Some theories tend to consider the role of interaction less relevant for the process of Second Language Acquisition. For example, Krashen considers the exposure to a great quantity of input much more important than interaction. However, that is not the position of Vygotsky, who views interaction not only as a helpful factor for acquisition but a causative force. However, as every approach in SLA, also the sociocultural theory has its strong and weak points. It has a strong basis but it shows some limitations as well. For example, the distinction between use and acquisition is not always clear and sometimes it seems that it focuses more on L2 use rather than on the process of acquisition itself. However, it is still considered to be the fundamental basis for the *Interaction Hypothesis*.

The *Interaction Hypothesis* is inevitably related to the names of Michael Long and Teresa Pica. The experimental studies conducted by Pica emphasized the importance which social relationships between participants might have to produce interactional modifications. Pica's experimental studies greatly contributed to the Interaction theory and produced many pedagogical implications. However, this hypothesis draws on the ethnomethodology's works of other scholars, such as Hatch, Jefferson, Sachs and Schegloff. Hatch draws the attention to the idea that learners actually learn the second language by interacting with other people and that interaction is not simply a means to demonstrate what was already learnt. This process of acquisition occurs through a specific kind of interaction, so called negotiation of meaning that serves to repair breakdowns in communication and also to prevent their occurrence. Nevertheless, negotiation of meaning is not the only way through which acquisition may occur: Pica demonstrated that also uninterrupted conversation may help acquisition, though rather researcher maintains that conversational exchanges may facilitate language acquisition.

In *The Interaction Hypothesis: A Critical Evaluation*, Rod Ellis summarizes the *Interaction Hypothesis* in three main postulates:

- (1) "Comprehensible input is necessary for second language acquisition;
- (2) Modifications to the interactional structure of conversations, which take place in the process of negotiating a communication problem help to make input comprehensible to an L2 learner;
- (3) Tasks in which there is a need for the participants to exchange information with each other promote more interactional reconstructing". (Ellis 9)

Another statement may be added on the basis of the works of Teresa Pica.

- (4) "A situation in which the conversational partners share a symmetrical role relationship affords more opportunities for interactional reconstructing". (Ellis 8)

The last statement clarifies that social factors are involved in a successful process of SLA, as people who are aware of their unequal linguistic proficiencies in the second language but at the same time are conscious of having an equivalent status are more likely to create opportunities for interactional modifications and, consequently, for language development.

This element emphasized by Pica, in some way, may echo the importance of the social environment, as it has been already underlined by Vygotsky, inasmuch it is within a social interaction that the process of acquisition may occur and be fostered. By analyzing the first statement highlighted by Ellis, it becomes obvious that Long, in developing the *Interaction Hypothesis*, proceeds from the same assumption of *Input Hypothesis*. Indeed, as it is the case with the *Input Hypothesis*, also the *Interactional Hypothesis* seems to focus more on incidental acquisition, rather than on intentional one. Linguistic competence appears to be primarily incidental, even if Long, by developing his pedagogical point of view, restates the importance of formal instruction for an effective acquisition.

Krashen, the founder of the *Input Hypothesis*, in his works, puts forward the idea that acquisition (being mainly unconscious while learning is a conscious process) happens when the learner is exposed to an adequate amount and quality of comprehensible input. Indeed, according to Krashen, real acquisition occurs when the L2 learner is focused on the meaning rather than on the form, so comprehensible input is essential. Yet, according to him, language production plays no role in the acquisition process. Hatch, on the other hand, advances the hypothesis that the order of acquisition depends on the frequency with which some features occur, so she considered interaction as the main factor which affects acquisition.

Long agrees with Krashen, since both scholars consider input necessary for second language acquisition. It is evident for both that a greater quantity of comprehensible input seems to help and foster a faster acquisition. Though, according to Krashen, input is necessary and sufficient for SLA, if we focus on the process of the first language acquisition, for instance, we'll notice that children do not learn how to speak just by watching television or listening to various recordings. Hence, interaction is also necessary for the first language acquisition.

In his theory, Long emphasizes the importance and the nature of modifications. The scholar focuses his attention on the importance of conversations and on all the possible changes that may occur during the act of speaking, especially between native speakers and non-native ones. Modifications of the language that occur in the process of interaction provide the elements necessary to make the input comprehensible, so they facilitate the process of acquisition. Thus, input alone is not sufficient to acquire higher levels of proficiency in language acquisition. According to this view, interaction is important because it may produce, through modifications of conversational or linguistic elements, the comprehensible input necessary for linguistic development. As Gass has pointed out, Long "made an important distinction between modified input, or foreigner talk, and modified interaction, differentiating between the modified talk directed to the learner

and the modified structure of the conversation itself” (284). Long has called these changes in the structure of a speech *interactional modifications*. They differ from the input modifications, which are fundamental for the *Input Hypothesis* stated by Krashen, in particular because the latter can occur both in an interactional situation and in a monologic discourse.

Input is considered necessary for both L1 and L2 learning. As regards second language acquisition, it has been noticed that usually the language used to interact with a L2 learner differs from language used among native speakers. Those kinds of input modifications have been defined as *foreigner* talk, which may be a form of simplified input, where some grammatical elements might be omitted or shorter sentences might be preferred. The characteristics of *foreigner* talk might be as follows: use of a simpler vocabulary, slow rate of speech interrupted by long pauses in order to give the learner more time to grasp the meaning of the words, careful articulation of words, speaking louder than usual, simplification of grammatical structures, less contractions, etc. The final target of these modifications is to enhance the adult learner’s competence and they usually are produced unconsciously by the native speaker. They can be considered as part of the communicative competence developed after many years of interaction with non-native learners. These types of adaptation may be compared to the *baby* talk used by the caretakers to address young children, whilst the role of these simplifications in the development of the competence of such children is not testified.

These modifications may occur both in written text and in oral speech. They may be useful to help learners to better understand what is said or written, but although oral modifications can make acquisition easier, all L1 and many L2 learners can succeed without them. As regards modifications in written input, despite their efficacy in improving the comprehension of a text, there are very few researches that may demonstrate their efficiency. *Interactional* modifications seem to be more effective than input modifications in enhancing the acquisition and can include:

- Repetition
- Paraphrase
- Expansion and elaboration
- Sentence completion and frame for substitution

Vertical constructions: it is a notion associated with scaffolding and the native speaker manages to help the learner by constructing a congruent discourse from different independent words with their particular meaning;

- Comprehension checks and request for clarification

There is another feature as well that can enhance acquisition, namely, feedback, which basically means correction. It is possible to distinguish two types of corrections: direct or indirect. It is a kind of modification that is specific of second language acquisition, while it is rarely used with children who are learning their first language. It has been demonstrated that such corrections are not really effective for the improvement of L1. Though, as regards SLA, it appears to be effective for those who want to achieve a native-like level of proficiency. The negative feedback could be of two kinds: direct correction or indirect correction.

Another element emphasized by Long is to what extent exchange of information may foster acquisition: indeed, in this process the participants are provided with more opportunities for production and that could be helpful for the whole process of acquisition, because they are forced and motivated to improve their output. The basic idea here is that input is important for comprehension, hence, it is the quantity that matters. Both Long and Pica acknowledged that interlanguage can develop only if the participants are ‘forced’ to improve their output. Using the *Interactional Hypothesis* as the theoretical source, Pica also points out the need to form classes that can provide a fertile ground for interactional modifications and negotiation of meaning. Yet, what Long truly highlights in his *Interaction Hypothesis* is not the role of output as a causative force of learner’s development but the fact that the learners’ outcome may cause changes in the input that they are going to receive.

Long’s first version of the *Interactional Hypothesis* is structured in three phases: firstly, demonstration that such modifications, which occur during the negotiation of meaning can truly facilitate input’s comprehension; secondly, that input has to be shown as essential in promoting acquisition; finally, it will be possible to assume that those modifications help the process of acquisition.

However, many scholars disagree with Long’s statements and argue, for instance, that input processing for comprehension and input processing for learning are two different processes that cannot be equated. A learner can infer the meaning of the received input by relying on the context or on their knowledge of the world without truly understanding the structural elements of a speech act. In this case, we have comprehension without actual acquisition.

Moreover, not only is the interactional modified input beneficial for acquisition, but also, as Krashen claimed, the premodified input, that is, simplified input produced without interaction, works well. The early stage of this theory has been challenged in many other ways: negotiation of the meaning may result in a fake comprehension, since there are several social constraints that can affect the effectiveness of that act. Moreover, the recognition of negotiation acts is not straightforward: misunderstandings may occur since, for instance, the modified repetition of the sentence the learner has produced can merely signify that the hearer is following what is said. Other criticisms against the early *Interaction Hypothesis* point out the fact that it is not yet demonstrated that more negotiations generate better comprehension, since it has been reported that it is the quality of negotiation that determines the efficacy of the process, not the quantity. Actually, some theorists have noticed that if the learners receive many thorough corrections, that could have a damaging effect on their comprehension, instead of improving it. Finally, not every part of the speech can be negotiated: there are some aspects, such as inflectional morphology, that cannot face this process.

In 1996, Long develops an updated version of the *Interaction Hypothesis*: his goal is to argue many of those criticisms, so he decides to focus on the role of modified input received through interaction in order to achieve acquisition. The modified input helps the learner to notice linguistic forms in the input, forms that rely on learner's processing capacity. It has been noticed that it is the interpersonal interaction, which enables the learner to notice different features in the input, whereas intrapersonal interactions have the function of elaborating such negotiated input. Long, in the updated version of the hypothesis, points out the role of negative evidence and modified output for acquisition. *Input Hypothesis* and *Interaction Hypothesis* cannot be equated, even if, at first, they may be compared since both the theories state that acquisition is input dependent and learner's exposure to communicative language will determine the rate of proficiency he or she will attain, but whereas Krashen considers interaction as just one of the three ways through which a learner can receive comprehensible input, Long stresses the relevance of this input provided through interaction. Initially, however, Long hadn't recognized the absolute necessity of such an input.

Firstly, Long observes that modifications of input occur more frequently in conversations between non-native speakers than between natives. The scholar holds that it happens for two main reasons: first of all, such modified input helps learners to avoid many troubles during conversations; secondly, they intervene to "fix" the communicative acts when those troubles still occur. Pica, on the other hand, demonstrates that native speakers are more willing to transform their discourse, both structurally and semantically, when a communication problem occurs, whereas non-native speakers tend to maintain the original structure or are not able to find different alternatives. Pica also points out that different adjustments have different qualitative effects on the output and they are more helpful for acquisition.

The works of Pica and Long have laid the foundations for further pedagogical approaches. Long analyzes several methods of teaching that he considered flawed or ineffective. The two main teaching methods are the instructed one and the natural approach. The instructed approach may be defined as traditional: it is teacher-centered, there is little or no space for errors, the input provided is minimal and it is usually related to few model sentences, the communication, which occurs in the class is a pseudo communication and the main assumption is that communicative abilities evolve out of grammar. The natural approach, on the other hand, is built on the idea that what teachers have to do is to provide learners with comprehensible input: the classroom has to be a place where the affective filter is low, the communication has to be native-like and it is not important that it is error-free.

Long's point of view remains distant from both these approaches even if he recognizes effective and useful elements in both. He draws the conclusion that, in any case, formal instruction has positive effects on SLA and that it is impossible to achieve a native-like level of acquisition without instruction. In most of the cases, immersion or any kind of natural approaches may lead to a good comprehension of the language, but the risk of pidginization rises. To attain an excellent proficiency, instruction is necessary. Though, formal teaching cannot modify acquisition sequences. Perhaps instruction may cause temporary modification. Long considers focusing on form as a way for some features of the language to be highlighted, such as targeted input. He also promotes group work, since he considers it beneficial and useful for creating prolific situations in which modifications may occur more frequently and easily.

Both Pica and Long have certainly furtherly raised the awareness about the role of interaction in the Second Language Acquisition studies. They conclude that input is necessary for acquiring a language, but it is not sufficient. Obviously, all these theories discussed might be questioned in many ways. Firstly, there are no direct evidences that can support *Input Hypothesis* and the *Interactional Hypothesis* may be argued as well. Yet, the importance of comprehensible input cannot be simply set aside. Many indirect evidences show that the more frequently the learner is exposed to many features of the studied language, the more likely he or she will attain a good proficiency. These indirect evidences are, for example, caretaker speech and *foreigner talk*, which try to tune communication to facilitate the comprehension, the silent period, during which no output is produced but the language is still being learnt, immersion programs and bilingual programs, which provide learners with more comprehensible input. Secondly, it is difficult to demonstrate that interactional modifications are more easily comprehended. While several studies seem to demonstrate that modified input helps comprehension, other studies state the opposite, that is, in some cases, simplification can inhibit comprehension instead of promoting it. Yet, even these contradictory theories might be argued because modified input and interactional modifications are not the same thing and interactional modifications seem to result in higher level of comprehension.

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