Classroom Interaction and Second Language Acquisition: The More Interactions the Better?

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Abstract

This paper attempts to describe the relationship between interaction and SLA in the classroom. Research findings tend to point to the conclusion that more involvement in interaction does not ensure better achievements. This conclusion points to the importance of looking at classroom interaction (CI) and second language acquisition (SLA) holistically. Learners learn by engaging in interactions *per se* but also by listening to interactions. The implication for classroom pedagogy is that the teacher should not encourage more interactions single-mindedly but base his decisions of varying the dimensions of CI on a host of factors.

Key words: Interaction; Observable participation; Unobservable participation; Eavesdropping

According to Ellis (1994), the classroom provides the L2 researchers with three perspectives of study: comparative method studies, the study of the effects of formal instruction, and classroom interaction (CI) studies (p.565). Among the three, it is the last which attracts researchers' prolonged interest. The reasons are simple and evident: firstly, interaction is "the fundamental fact of classroom pedagogy …everything that happens in the classroom happens through a process of live person-to-person interaction" (Allwright, 1984, p.156). Secondly, interaction plays an important role for second or foreign language acquisition (SLA/FLA). It provides the opportunity for the obtaining of comprehensible input and the production of pushed output which are crucial for the internalization of language knowledge. Language serves for communication and the acquisition of a language is generally fulfilled in the interaction with others. In interaction with others one learns to use language and resultantly to modify and expand the IL system. Classroom interaction, compared with interaction in the naturalistic environment, presents different patterns of interaction with different characteristics, such as teacher-fronted interaction and small group work.

The functioning of different types of CI has close connection with the organization of classroom activities which is generally divided into three broad stages: presentation, practice and production, and this fosters the types of interaction to happen and student participation influences the real occurrence of interaction. This paper aims to identify the relationship between interaction and SLA in the classroom setting, that is, how these interaction opportunities bear on the learner's language acquisition; is it true that learners who actively initiate interaction and negotiate meaning are better achievers than those that are not? Or in other words, is it the more interactions the better?

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The introduction of the interactive approach into classroom learning and the study of CI is largely attributed to social interactionism which emphasizes the role of other speakers around the language learner by means of interaction.

1.1 Social Interactionism

Actually, the realization and recognition of the role of interaction for language learning are recent events. According to Richards and Rodgers, "Interaction has been central to theories of L2 learning and pedagogy since the 1980s" (p.22).

Yet the theory which provides strong impetus is the school of social interactionism with Vygotsky as the proponent. One of his important idea is "*the zone of proximal development*" which refers to "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). Together with Feuerstein, another social interactionist, Vygotsky puts forward the concept of *mediation* which refers to "the part played by other significant people in learners' lives, who enhance their learning by selecting and shaping the learning experiences presented to them" (Williams & Burden, 1997, p.40).As social interactionists see it, "children are born into a social world, and learning occurs through interaction with other people"(Williams & Burden, 1997, p.39). Social interactionists recognize the value of interaction in children and attempt to expand the concept of interaction into the classroom setting. The application of social interactionism is manifested in the advocacy for the use of language for communication.

1.2 The role of Interaction

Interaction plays a constructive role in the SLA. The role of interaction is clarified by Long in his Interaction Hypothesis. Long (1985) suggests that "negotiation" is indirectly connected with acquisition: since linguistic/ conversational adjustments promote the comprehension of input and comprehensible input promotes acquisition, it can be deduced that linguistic/conversational adjustments promote acquisition (p.378). In the process of getting meaning across, one of the interlocutors makes due adjustments by means of simplification and paraphrase whenever there is difficulty of understanding or misunderstanding occurs. These adjustments make input more comprehensible. These types of adjustments call attention to output produced and call for modifications by recourse to IL system. (Allwright & Bailey, 1991, p.124).

1.3 Influence of Interactive Approach on Classroom

Inspired by studies of caretaker talk and foreigner talk, teacher talk (TT), viewed as foreigner talk in the classroom (Krashen, 1982, p.24), is also examined and various kinds of analysis are applied to CI, such as interaction analysis and discourse analysis.

Accordingly many defects are identified. Conventional class is severely criticized for many of its aspects: the stiffness of the triadic interaction sequence of IRF, the lack of opportunity for collective negotiation of meaning, etc..

Thus the teachers are called on to encourage similar interactions to those existing in the naturalistic environment. However, characteristics of CI render this simple solution rather difficult to achieve effect, the classroom as a special learning setting is far more complicated.

2. QUANTITATIVE REASEARCH ON INTERACTION AND SLA

Allwright and Bailey have asked the question --- "Is interaction a 'good thing'?" and pointed out that "teachers and researchers alike want to know whether classroom interaction does, in fact, lead to enhanced language learning" (130).

Researchers are interested in finding out whether more participation in interaction causes greater achievement, attempting to find empirical support for the encouragement of more interactions in class. Some researchers set out to investigate and define the relationship between interaction and learning outcome in the classroom. Yet the complex relationship between them never fails to render the research results in dispute.

Seliger posed the question --- "does practice make perfect?", wanting to know if the learners' participation patterns were in any way related to their achievement in learning English (qtd. in Allwright & Bailey, 1991, p.130). He distinguishes two types of learners: high input generators (HIGs) and low input generators (LIGs). HIGs refer to those learners who "by initiating and sustaining conversations through taking turns, caused other people to use language with them, to provide them with language samples" and LIGs "participate minimally – to speak only when called upon and to be generally passive in classroom interaction" (ibid). Through the analysis of student participation patterns, Seliger concludes that "learners who initiate interaction are better able to turn input into intake"(ibid).

In addition, Doughty and Pica's study of small group work and lockstep activity reveals that although more negotiation of meaning is involved in the former than in the latter, but conclusion cannot be drawn that "learners who actively negotiate for meaning actually achieve more, linguistically speaking, than those who do not" (149).

Finally, teachers' common observation shows that those active students no matter in whole class work or in group work are not necessarily best achievers from the interaction process. This echoes Ellis' comment that "there are grounds for believing that practice does not make perfect" (1994, p.593).

So far no conclusive results have been obtained. The mixed findings do not fully validate our natural and superficial assumption that students taking part in more interactions should achieve more. Allwright and Bailey argue as follows:

… quite clearly researchers do not yet know how or to what extent learners' observable participation is related to their success in mastering the target language. As we have seen, the research results so far are very mixed. There are theoretical and practical reasons for expecting learner participation to be productive, but no really compelling evidence that it actually is (p.149).

The controversial nature of research findings may be attributed to technical problems, such as the difficulty to discriminate and classify individual participation turns and to find an appropriate variable for the effect of interaction. It can be easily seen that the relationship between interaction and SLA is difficult to quantify, and it may be better not to quantify, since interaction is a complex and dynamic process and embodies many variables. "The extraordinary complexity of what happens in language classrooms makes it impossible to come to any simple straightforward conclusions – except the familiar conclusion that more research is clearly necessary"

(Allwright & Bailey, 1991, p.195). On the other hand, there is at least one thing to be sure that listeners may benefit no less if not more from interaction than interactants and the amount of interaction can not be the sole determinant of L2 development. Actually the correlation of the amount of interaction with second language development may be vulnerable. Disregarding the quantitative relationship between interaction and SLA, these researches and their findings point to the importance of considering unobservable behavior, such as listening, and non-verbal interaction, as well as observable participation in CI in defining the relationship between the two. For classroom learners interaction is not the more the better, since they can take advantage of multiple learning opportunities presented by CI.

3. THE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES PRESENTED BY CI AND SLA

CI provides opportunities of obtaining input and practicing through its various types of interaction. This determines that the learning outcome should not be measured solely in terms of the quantitative and observable aspect of student's participation in interaction.

3.1 Observable and Unobservable Participation

There have been many attempts to describe the turn-taking pattern of students.

Allwright and Bailey (1991, p.128)divide student participation behavior into observable activity and unobservable activity. The former is again divided into self-initiated turns and teacher-initiated turns while attention is involved in the unobservable activity of students.

While there are a minority of students who are engaged in interaction, what happens to the non-participants? According to Goffman, the "relation(s) among speaker, addressed recipient, and unaddressed recipient(s) are complicated, significant, and not much explored" (p.133). Yet the listeners can not be said to be non-participants in CI, they are just engaged in interaction indirectly: unobservable participation. They are consciously participating in the interaction process in an unobservable way.

Goffman's study on "participation framework" reveals that in communication both speaker and listener are imposed differing degrees of responsibility for the engagement in the talk: "when a word is spoken, all those who happen to be in the perceptual range of the event will have some sort of participation status relative to it"

The listeners in the classroom seem to have nothing to do with the talk which is going on, but actually the participation framework always reminds them of their responsibility to make contributions to the talk and of their status of being legal participants who should be prepared to take part. Learning in this situation may be characterized as "eavesdropping learning".

3.2 Two Basic Modes of Learning in CI

Researchers and teachers alike seem to be obsessed with observable participation,especially the engagement in verbal interaction. Teachers tend to credit voluntary turns with positive evaluation. As for researchers it is a lot easier to collect data for observable behavior and quantify the results. However, more verbal interaction can not be equated with better achievement. The measurement of progress made in language learning should be fulfilled in the full consideration of learning opportunities.

3.2.1 Learning Through the Direct Involvement in Interaction

For those that are directly involved in interaction, their mere direct participation puts them at some advantage. Allwright (1984a) "suggested the study of the notion of "uptake", that is, the investigation of what individual learners claim to have learned from the interactive classroom events which have just preceded" (qtd. in Slimani, 1992, p.200). Here "uptake" is used to mean the form existing in certain mental states through the effect of interaction.

Uptake may be stored in the interlanguage (IL) system and be acquired immediately in the interaction process, or it needs to be activated and confirmed in various interactions to be finally acquired. Acquisition is a gradual and continuous process rather than mere an outcome. One advantage about verbal interaction over other types is that the interactant is provided feedback immediately and aided by the interlocutor to find the correct target form, the latter may call into attention the utterance of the former and provide some clue or the correct form. In the interaction process the interactant is under urgent pressure to produce output and modify output, so his mind is fully occupied and attention is focused. This is one important advantage of engaging indirect interaction.

On the other hand, the immediacy and urgency of responding demanded in interaction always compose pressure on the interactant, he may become nervous and not so clear-minded. For better or worse this influence the effect of interaction. So sometimes the active interactant may not be the largest beneficiary of the interaction

process. In the classroom environment the learners learn not only from taking part in interaction but from listening to student talk, teacher talk, and teacher-student interaction. Through this process the learner can get input and expand his IL system indirectly.

3.2.2 Eavesdropping Learning

According to Allwright and Bailey, teachers should not be too "determined to make sure that all of our learners are equally and fully active contributors to our lessons, because there are likely to be some who think they will learn best by simply paying attention to what other people are saying, rather than by saying very much themselves" (p.150). Listening or hearing can form a style of learning called "eavesdropping learning" to use John Schumann's words. Through a diary study he found that he strongly preferred "eavesdropping" to speaking as a learning strategy (qtd. in Allwright & Bailey, 1991, pp.144-145). Listening can be viewed as indirect participation. The listeners can be classified into two types: attentive and casual listeners. Attentive listeners pay more attention to what goes on in the classroom while casual listeners are a little detached from the classroom event and occupy themselves with what they think important.

Then the question arises: what is the value of eavesdropping learning? As speaking is always favored in the language class, the effect of listening to interaction seems to be ignored. Many learners think listening to interactions is a waste of time. More research in this aspect may throw light on the issue of listening to CI.Nonetheless limited studies reveal that listening can be fruitful.

Ohta's study reveals that learners not directly addressed by the teacher make an as active use of teacher assistance as learners who are the focus of the teacher's attention by making corresponding modifications to their own language use through observation and reflection on the teacher talk with other students (qtd. in Hall, 2000, p.291). Instead of direct participation, attentive listeners make similar efforts to find out answers to questions and make modifications when indirectly receiving feedback which is addressed to the direct interactant. Thus his IL system is equally extended.

4. CONLCUSION ON CI AND SLA

SLA is brought about not only by verbal interaction, but also by listening and interaction with texts as input, which is especially true of low proficiency learners and those who prefer listening. These means and their roles are not in conflict, their integration guarantees successful language acquisition. Less verbal interaction in the classroom does not necessarily lead to low proficiency. Those learners who get a large proportion of talk with teacher or other learners do not all become high proficient learners. The amount of verbal interaction may influence learner's speaking proficiency, but not the general proficiency levels.

Language acquisition is a gradual and recurrent process instead of something accomplished once for all. In CI, one item negotiated in interaction may not be acquired by the interactant but by the listeners. Moreover, it is unreasonable to claim that the complete acquisition of one item is accomplished in a short time span. The repetitious encounter with it through interaction, listening and reading and writing can result in its full acquisition. As to the classroom where learners are at different proficiency levels, CI should create various forms of interaction to provide different learners with different opportunities to get input, convert input into output, promote the conversion of output into uptake, and so on. For different learners, they are placed at different learning stages and can take what they need from interactions in the classroom to alter and expand their IL system. Rivers states the role of CI in this way:

Through interaction, students can increase their language store as they listen to or read authentic linguistic material, or even the output of their fellow students in discussions, skits, joint problem-solving tasks, or dialogue journals (4-5).

In addition, classroom presents different patterns and modes of interaction from that in naturalistic environment and consequently interactions of different quantity and qualityare involved in the two types, but it does not naturally lead to the conclusion that the classroom is an inferior environment for SLA to take place. The natural setting does possess advantages: the real negotiation of meaning, more turns of negotiation, etc., and learners in this environment may acquire high communicative competence. The classroom does not fail to produce proficient learners who may be a little inferior in speaking but not in other language skills. One of the important advantages of the classroom lies in the fact that the teacher can vary the dimensions of the classroom and thus can create multiple learning opportunities where the students at different proficiency levels and of different learning styles can get input, practice opportunities and then convert input into intake.

5. CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS

The classroom is a place promoting and facilitating the learning process: the assimilation of input, the conversion of input into output, the production of output, and the activation and enlargement of the IL system through interaction. Learners with their multiple facets of differences manifest distinct features of undergoing the learning process, interacting with the learning environment in specific ways.Sometimes the middle ground is sought and negotiation has to be reached for the solution of contradictions between the individual and the whole and among individual students.

In the classroom setting the amount and types of interaction can be altered through different means: different tasks may give rise to different patterns of interaction. Information gap activities are commonly used to elicit student interactions. Information-gap activity involves "the transfer of given information from one person to another, or one place to another, or one form to another" (Foley, 1991, p.71). In the process of fulfilling such kind of tasks the learners have to use language for real communication. However, it can hardly be said to be true that language development problems will be solved by the mere increase of the amount of interaction. The qualitative differences between interactions should also be taken into consideration. It should be reiterated that interaction is not the more the better for individual learners as Allwright and Bailey point out that not all learners learn best through active participation, all they do need universally is an environment in which they can settle down to productive work in their various subtly different ways (1991, p.150).

The type and quantity of interactions in classroom vary form one class to another. The oral class possesses more interactions and attaches great importance to real use of language while the grammar class may involve less interactions and the chances of using language for real communication are reduced. The variations in interaction are largely attributed to the teacher's effort, but the teacher's decisions to vary interactions are not made arbitrarily. His decision should be based on the basic types of CI which are indispensable for any class to be successful. The characteristics of these basic patterns require their integration in different ways. Besides, he has to consider students' characteristics, the subject matter, and many more.

Hall (1999) makes a good summary of the considerations for the altering the dimensions of interaction in the classroom: What counts as an appropriate range of possible uses of the linguistic resources and sequences of moves by students in classroom practices is constrained by the degree of sociocultural authority attached to the frame (IRF), by the varying consequences of moving within or away from it, and by a variety of extralinguistic, socioculturally defined factors, such as the kind of class it is (e.g., the grade level and/or area of study), the topic being discussed, the ages of the students, and the role that the teacher plays in directing the talk (p.143).

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