A Critical Review of L2 Interaction

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Abstract: The goal for many learners of English as a second or foreign language is to be able to cope with real-time communication, whether in their personal or professional lives. Indeed, the need for what is often termed communicative competence when dealing with speakers of other languages is increasingly apparent in today's globalized world. This goal can most effectively be realized in the classroom through the provision of plentiful opportunities for meaningful interaction, as this is most likely to facilitate the development of the necessary implict knowledge. Such interaction also approximates the target situation much more closely than traditional, grammar-based approaches, which further increases the likelihood of this knowledge being retrieved during authentic, real-world interaction. Finally, I argue that the effectiveness of this approach can be enhanced by encouraging learners to negotiate meaning among themselves, as well as the judicious use of focus on form. Theoretical and empirical support for this perspective is offered, in addition to my own experience as a language teacher.

Keywords: interaction, implicit knowledge, negotiation of meaning

Introduction

There are many possible goals for language learning, which by necessity vary according to the needs of the individual. For example, some learners might prioritize reading texts, while others want to learn grammatical structure. Still others simply want to pass an exam. However, the main goal of language learning, and therefore instruction, is often assumed to be the development of communicative competence, and the ability to cope with real-time, real-life situations (Loewen, 2015). This objective is heightened by increasing globalization and the need to communicate with speakers of other languages. It is therefore incumbent on language practitioners to attempt to optimize instruction so that learners can achieve that aim. My own view is that meaningful interaction is an essential condition of learning for those who want to develop the skills required for authentic communication beyond the classroom. In this paper I will outline the theoretical justification for this view, as well as reviewing the relevant empirical evidence. Finally, I will refer to my own experience as a language teacher, which has led me to support an interactionist view of language learning.

Background to the issue

If the goal of language teaching is to help learners communicate in the L2, it is important to determine more precisely what kind of knowledge is needed to achieve that aim. Once that has been established, the kind of pedagogical activities that are likely to develop such knowledge can be considered.

What kind of knowledge is necessary to communicate?
Communicative competence, as originally espoused by Canale and Swain (1980), comprises the elements of linguistic competence (i.e., grammatical, lexical, and phonological knowledge), sociolinguistic competence (concerned with pragmatics and appropriacy), discourse competence (related to coherence and cohesion), and strategic competence (concerning the ability to overcome communication breakdowns). Knowledge of all four of these elements is essential for a learner to be able to communicate accurately, fluently, and appropriately.

According to the cognitive view, all linguistic knowledge is held either explicitly or implicitly, with the distinction resting on the degree of consciousness (Ellis, 2008). Explicit knowledge is consciously held and can be verbalized, whether this is expressed through metalinguistic language or not. Implicit knowledge, by contrast, is held unconsciously and intuitively. It can be retrieved without effort, as exemplified by the way native speakers converse about familiar topics. While explicit knowledge is needed in some situations, such as when sitting a grammar exam, implicit knowledge is required for smooth, oral communication. This is because such situations call for the rapid production of language, when there is little time for reflection or consideration of the linguistic items in use. It is, therefore, this kind of implicit, intuitive knowledge that should form the primary goal of language instruction (Ellis, 2005).

A related, although slightly different, perspective on the nature of L2 knowledge is provided by Skill Acquisition Theory (DeKeyser, 2007). This posits that all linguistic knowledge exists on a continuum, beginning as declarative (analogous to explicit) knowledge. It then becomes proceduralized through practice, and ultimately automatized and available for use in unplanned production, similar to implicit knowledge. It remains controversial as to whether, or in what circumstances, explicit (or declarative) knowledge can actually become implicit. Supporters of the non-interface position argue it cannot, while the strong interface position is based on the premise that, through practice, it can. Still others argue that it can, only to the extent that the learner's stage of development allows (Ellis, 2008). In other words, unless a learner is developmentally ready to acquire a variational feature, such as third person -s, practice alone will not facilitate its transfer from explicit to implicit knowledge, as represented in the mind of the learner.

Despite such differences in perspective regarding the nature of L2 knowledge, there is a consensus among cognitivists that it is this implicit, or automatized, knowledge that is necessary for the kind of spontaneous communication that is assumed to be the overall goal of language teaching. The question then becomes how best to attain that knowledge.

The role of interaction

Interaction is now widely accepted as having a crucial role in the development of communicative competence. In other words, learners who want to be able to communicate orally in an L2 need opportunities to practice in meaningful contexts. That might sound entirely logical, but it must be remembered that such a view would at one point have been considered controversial. In fact it was once felt that habit-forming repetitive drills were the key to oral second language development, with mistakes to be avoided at all costs. The results of such behaviorism-inspired approaches were disappointing, however, largely because they lacked the critical connection between form and meaning, which is indeed the very essence of language itself (DeKeyser, 2007).

Another early, or traditional, view of language learning is that it should consist primarily of the explicit accumulation of lexical and morphosyntactic knowledge (Loewen, 2015). Yet the notion that this, too, can lead to communicative competence lacks support, with its stubborn persistence in many pedagogical contexts probably owing more to practical than theoretical or empirical considerations.

Modern, meaning-based approaches to SLA are often traced back to Krashen (1982), who emphasized the importance of comprehensible input in developing the implicit knowledge required for spontaneous communication. Yet Krashen's assertion that input alone is sufficient to drive language acquisition has been criticized on the grounds that he failed to recognize the importance of interaction and output. In the updated version of his interaction hypothesis, Long (1996) maintained that language acquisition is facilitated by the negotiation of meaning, as the need to be understood by an interlocutor makes areas of linguistic difficulty highly salient. Crucially, the fact that such real-time interaction is primarily concerned with conveying meaning promotes the development of the kind of implicit knowledge necessary for spontaneous communication.

Another argument in favour of promoting interaction in L2 learning environments comes from the concept of transfer appropriate processing. According to this theory, it is easier to retrieve information in situations that resemble those in which it was acquired. This is due to the fact that when something is learned, aspects of the learning context are also recorded and internalized (Lightbown, 2008). This has important implications for second language learning in terms of how knowledge is measured and assessed, but also in terms of the kind of environment and activities that should be provided. For example, if learners wish to access implicit knowledge during authentic interaction, their ability to do so will be enhanced if that knowledge has been acquired during interaction itself. In pedagogical terms, this means approximating the target situation and providing learners with the opportunity to interact with others, when the focus is on conveying meaning.

The Interaction Approach

Having established the need for implicit knowledge, and the general role of meaning-

based interaction in acquiring that knowledge, it is necessary to analyze such interaction more closely. In other words, what are its individual elements and how exactly do they contribute to language acquisition? In order to do this let us examine the Interaction Approach, both in terms of the theory and some of the research associated with it.

Theoretical perspectives

In broad terms, the key elements of pedagogical interaction have been defined as input, negotiation of meaning, and output (Loewen, 2015). By definition, one person's output becomes another person's input, with negotiation of meaning serving to deal with any communication breakdowns that arise. The Interaction Approach views all three of these elements as essential to language acquisition.

Input has been further subdivided into the categories of positive and negative evidence (Long, 1996). The former consists of linguistic features that are accurate or permissible in the relevant language. In terms of interaction, positive evidence takes the form of target-like utterances that are supplied by an interlocutor. Negative evidence, by contrast, provides information about what is not accurate or permissible in the L2. During interaction, such information can be supplied when communication has been unsuccessful, and learners become aware that an utterance was inaccurate, or non target-like.

It is these unsuccessful attempts at communication that open the door to the negotiation of meaning. When learners receive negative evidence, this promotes attention to form and provides the immediate opportunity to produce modified output (Long, 1996). Through this process, learners can notice gaps between their own inaccurate output and more target-like forms. It is then possible to connect an appropriate form with the meaning they intend to convey.

The third element of interaction is output; that is the language actually produced by learners. Although Krashen (1982) has maintained that output is simply a byproduct of acquisition, others have convincingly argued for the role of output in the acquisition process. Swain's (1995) comprehensible output hypothesis was based on the observation that L2 immersion students in Canada lacked the grammatical accuracy to match their spoken fluency. She attributed this to a lack of opportunity to produce output, which meant that the less salient, morphosyntactic features of the language were less likely to be processed and thereby acquired.

In the context of interaction, output allows learners to test hypotheses about the L2 and what they believe might be possible (Skehan, 1998). A hypothesis can either be confirmed, if communication proceeds unhindered, or disconfirmed, should the communication break down or corrective feedback be received. It seems clear, therefore, that output does indeed have an important role to play in L2 acquisition.

Empirical evidence

Research on learner-to-learner interaction in the L2 classroom has tended to take two forms. The first, a more descriptive approach, is concerned with how the variables of task, interlocutor, and context affect the nature of such interaction. The other examines

the relationship between interaction and the actual learning process. A selection of relevant studies is presented in this section.

Regarding task type, it has been found that two-way information gap activities, and specifically those that require learners to reach agreement, generally lead to more negotiation of meaning than open-ended tasks (Ellis, 2003). Interlocutor characteristics can also have an effect on the quality of interaction. For example, Kim and McDonough (2008) found that learners tend to adopt a more passive role when their interlocutor is of a higher proficiency level, but become more collaborative with partners of a similar level. Interestingly, Ellis, Tanaka, and Yamazaki (1994) found that learners acquired more vocabulary by negotiating with each other than with a teacher.

The significance of these studies is that they reveal what kinds of situations and activities promote the negotiation of meaning, which interactionists view as a key source of L2 acquisition. However, this implies an acceptance that such interaction is indeed beneficial. In order to verify this, it is necessary to look at some studies that investigate the effects of interaction on L2 development.

Mackey and Goo's (2007) meta-analysis found that learners who took part in interactive tasks improved their grammatical and lexical knowledge considerably more than those who did not. Moreover, the fact that these differences were greater on delayed than immediate post-tests implies that such interactive activities might indeed contribute to the growth of implicit knowledge. A number of individual studies, too, have found that classroom interaction promotes L2 development. For example, Mackey (1999) found that learners who engaged in negotiated interaction made more progress in question formation than both a control group and learners who undertook the same exercises but without interaction. In addition, Loewen (2005) found that learners who successfully modified their output as a result of interaction improved their chances of answering correctly on subsequent post-tests.

The limitations of interaction

There is a good deal of research, comprising both individual studies and meta-analyses, that shows interaction in the L2 classroom can have a positive effect on L2 development. However, some researchers (for example Foster, 1998) have questioned the extent to which learners actually engage in classroom negotiation of meaning. This is all the more pertinent in an EFL context such as Japan, as learners with a shared L1 are more likely to comprehend even each other's inaccurate output.

There is also an argument that meaning-focused interaction does not make linguistic features salient enough for acquisition to occur (Loewen, 2015). Indeed, Schmidt's (1983) seminal case study of *Wes* shows the dangers of relying on meaning-based communication alone. Wes, a Japanese-born resident of Hawaii, was able to converse relatively fluently in English, and improved considerably in terms of strategic and discourse competence during the three years of the study. Yet he exhibited very little linguistic development, as he focused almost entirely on conveying meaning and

was able to do so sufficiently well for his needs. The significance of this study is that Wes, as is perhaps the case with millions of immigrants around the world, was held back by a lack of attention to form. This case study therefore adds weight to the argument in favour of deliberate attention to linguistic form and against the purest interpretations of the Communicative Approach to language teaching.

Focus on form

Negotiation of meaning, within the wider context of meaning-based communication, represents one kind of attention to linguistic form. But given that such interaction might not be successful, or even widely occur, in all instructional contexts, a consensus has emerged that communicative activities should be balanced with more explicit attention to linguistic form. In fact Nation (2007), in his influential *Four Strands*, has made the point that a variety of activities is essential to the development of the fluency and accuracy needed for all-round communicative competence. This includes explicit instruction, as well as meaning-focused interaction and fluency-building activities.

One way to achieve this balance is to incorporate a so-called *focus on form* approach (Long, 1996). This occurs when learners are encouraged to pay brief attention to linguistic form during meaning-focused communication. It is a broader concept than negotiation of meaning because, rather than relying on a breakdown in communication, it encompasses any attempt to draw attention to linguistic items during interaction, including corrective feedback. It is argued that without such interventions learners will naturally tend to prioritize semantic content over form, given the difficulties of attending to both during communication (Van Patten, 1990). This recalls Swain's (1995) observation that the grammatical accuracy of Canadian immersion students did not match their spoken fluency. In empirical terms, too, there is plenty of evidence to support the use of focus on form, for example Lyster and Saito's (2010) meta-analysis of oral corrective feedback. They concluded that its success rests on the provision of negative evidence, along with opportunities for modified output.

Personal reflections

Having looked at the theoretical and empirical grounds for interaction, I will end by offering a personal perspective. I have taught an English discussion class at Rikkyo University in Japan for over five years. The course is required for all freshman students, with the overall goal being to improve their spoken fluency. This intensive interaction setting provides plentiful opportunities for output, and by extension input. Students are also encouraged to negotiate meaning when necessary, although I am in full agreement with Naughton (2006), who has claimed that training learners *how* to interact effectively is the key to its success. Teaching strategies such as paraphrasing, asking for clarification, and follow-up questions can help learners sustain their interaction and overcome the inevitable difficulties that arise.

There is a further benefit to meaning-based interaction that I have not mentioned

until now, and that is its effect on motivation. Particularly for learners who have spent years studying the formal properties of a language, being given the opportunity to exchange genuine opinions and information can feel liberating. The following comments, from two of my recent discussion class students, make this point well (the second one has been translated from the original Japanese):

> *Before I took this class I thought, "My English is not good. I don't want to speak English." However… my complex [about] speaking English was gone by this class.*

> *I often used to freeze when speaking English because I was thinking too much about grammar, but I'm gradually overcoming that now. English is not so scary any more.*

As a caveat, it must be borne in mind that some learners can have negative attitudes towards pair and group activities, and might not be aware of the benefits of learning implicitly, as opposed to learning more tangible and explicit grammar rules (McDonough, 2004). This implies a need to make learners aware of the reasons for using such activities.

Conclusion

I asserted at the beginning of this paper that, for many people, the main goal of language learning is the development of communicative competence. There is now a consensus among researchers that, for the vast majority of learners, this goal is unlikely to be achieved by heavily prioritizing the explicit teaching of form and structure, as has been the case with more traditional approaches. The robust principle of time on task, as well as Skill Acquisition Theory, suggest that learners need a substantial amount of practice interacting with others and actually producing output if they wish to be able to do so successfully, and with any fluency, in situations beyond the classroom. There is now an abundance of theoretical and empirical support for this view, which also resonates with my own experiences as a language teacher and learner. Moreover, affective and motivational benefits can additionally result when learners are encouraged to exchange real opinions and information, all of which makes a compelling case for the introduction of meaningful interaction in the L2 classroom. Yet an exclusive focus on meaning can be detrimental too. An appropriate amount of well-timed focus on form is also essential if learners are to avoid the so-called fossilization (or stabilization) of errors and increase their ultimate level of achievement.

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